



ARCANUM

Of Steamworks and Magick Obscura

A NOVELIZATION

*Being a Comprehensive Narrative of the Events
Transpiring Across the Continent of Arcanum*

COMPOSED AND CHRONICLED BY

Edward R. G. Mortimer & S Seorin



*Based upon the Principia Technologica and the
collected journals of the Living One*

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CHRONICLE

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Prologue: A Magnificently Daring and Dangerous Escape

I could stand it no longer. My surroundings served only as a reminder of everything that had transpired. *"I can run away,"* I thought. No sooner had I thought it than I began to plan it. *I never belonged in this life anyway, and now I will make a new life... one of my own choosing.*

I picked up anything in the house that I felt would fetch a substantial enough sum. Stuffing all of it into an oversized bag, I ran off to the nearest junk dealer and unloaded everything at once. I could've easily gotten more, but I was in a hurry. I'd heard there was a curious new flying machine called a zeppelin that would be leaving for Tarant later in the day. It seemed as though it was my only hope of leaving without being followed.

"I would like to purchase one ticket for the IFS Zephyr," I asked politely once I found the ticket counter.

The ticket seller seemed surprised, "One? Are you certain, madam? What about...?"

"I'm certain," I cut her off. "It's quite urgent and this is by far the fastest way to Tarant." She hesitantly counted the gold pieces I'd placed on the counter in front of her and handed me my ticket in exchange. I thanked her and raced off to the zeppelin.

It was glorious. My heart caught in my throat when the zeppelin first rose off the ground, but soon excitement overcame my apprehension and I began to enjoy myself. *I've done it. I'm free.*

My fellow passengers had the kind of class that I could only buy temporarily, but they didn't seem to mind sharing my company regardless. I chatted with a girl named Victoria, the youngest of three

pretty young daughters of the Warrington family. She wasn't quite so young as to be my daughter but it was close enough to bear consideration. She babbled on about adventures and various magicks for so long that it nearly put me to sleep. It was dreadfully boring, but the girl had always reminded me of the kind of person I had wanted to be when I grew up. She was enthusiastic and adventurous, excited for what the future might bring. Chatting with her felt almost nostalgic.

There was another girl by the name of Wilhemina that I'd known off and on in recent years. She couldn't stop yammering about the man she's going to meet when we arrive at Tarant. I'd met him a handful of times, a fragile young man by the name of Jared. He constantly had an expression that made it look as if his mother had just died. The whole thing made me want to roll my eyes, but then I also envied Wilhemina's innocence. Just because I was old enough now to be tired and bitter didn't give me the right to look down on those who still had their youthful naivete.

Even old Horace had a roguish charm about him. I found him rather attractive for a half-elf, but he wasn't around when I was younger so he didn't have the slightest idea about me. He bragged and bragged about his successful heists thinking to impress me. It was awfully charming, but if only he knew.... I made tentative plans to meet up with him later in his private cabin.

I tried to strike up a conversation with a few of the more dapper gents sharing a game of chess, but all I got in return was their subtle contempt. They barely paused from their game long enough to give me a disapproving stare and take another sip from their drinks. The nerve! Did they think that I wouldn't notice? It had always been like that since childhood, though. *Is it really going to be so easy to escape who I am?* I walked up to the bar intending on ordering a shot of whiskey, but then I thought better of it. The kind of people on this zeppelin weren't the kind to drink whiskey so I ordered wine instead. Upon tasting it I had to admit, the wine was exquisite. I'd always longed for such finery. I strolled out onto the deck to finish my glass while taking in the splendid view of the mountains. I'd probably never have another chance to experience any of this, so I had to make the most of it while it lasted.

If the shaking of the zeppelin hadn't caused me to drop my glass, the sight I saw outside certainly would have. My emotions were a tangled mix between wonderment at the strange flying machines zipping around the sky and horror at their attack. *I'm going to die on this blasted thing.*

Flames erupted on the deck of the zeppelin and quickly spread throughout the rest of the levels. The passengers below began panicked screaming while I merely looked after the strange machines, dumbfounded. It was as though a part of my mind desperately wanted to be more drunk than I'd had a chance to get before the end came.

One of the machines crashed into the zeppelin's port propeller, exploding in an instant. The sound was deafening, and the force of the explosion launched me nearly off the other side. I gripped onto a nearby rope for dear life, clinging to it desperately.

The remaining machine turned about to continue its attack on the zeppelin, determined to bring it down. I saw the pilot - a full-blooded ogre! I could see the crude bloodlust in his eyes for just a fleeting moment before the rickety contraption he was in exploded without cause. The flames leapt from his machine and onto the zeppelin, only speeding up the inevitable.

My only remaining prayer was that the frayed rope I clung to with white knuckles wouldn't light on fire before it snapped entirely. I'd much rather be splattered over a good rock than burned alive, especially wearing such a frilly dress. I've seen such things catch fire before and it's really quite the gruesome sight. I winced, thinking about it.

My train of thought was interrupted by the loudest, most horrible noise I have ever heard in my entire life. The sound of smashing glass, splintering wood, and snapping ropes wailed an unbearable cacophony as the zeppelin finally made its impromptu landing amidst the squat foothills. I closed my eyes and instinctively continued clinging to the rope.

I do not know how much time passed like that, but eventually the noise quieted down and I felt myself swaying gently in the breeze instead of being pulled mercilessly towards the ground. I opened my eyes to find myself hanging from that rope, mere inches above the ground, and the slightest bit of blood tricking down my wrists as a direct result of my vice-like grip. I slowly allowed my muscles to slacken and placed my feet on the ground.

The wreckage around me was a complete disaster. There were flames still billowing out of the zeppelin's broken windows and debris was littered all over the tiny valley it crashed into. "Help... Help me, please...", I heard a weak voice. It seemed to be coming from nearby, slightly further into the wreckage.

I grabbed ahold of a broken chunk of the zeppelin's hull and squatted underneath it. My arms flared up in intense pain when I tried to use them, still stiff from my clinging to the rope. Determined, I pushed harder and harder until at last the chunk of wood toppled over. *I doubt old Merle would've been able to lift that, just goes to show being a proper lady isn't everything.* Underneath the wooden chunk I saw an elderly gnome, gasping out his last breath before my very eyes.

"Oh thank you, my friend... I haven't got much time." His voice was weak and the strain of speaking caused him to go into a horrible coughing fit. I could tell at a glance that he was going to die, and soon. I pitied him. For his sake, the least I could do was listen to his last words. He seemed to think they were awful important and I was no stranger to the sight of death.

The little gnome shifted and his passport slid out of his coat pocket along with a book of matches. He reached out and pressed a ring into my palm. "You must find the boy... f-find the boy... and give him back his ring... and he will know what needs to be done." The next coughing fit was so horrendous that if I didn't know better I would've said he was faking. I was scared, not because he was going to die but because he didn't seem like he was being melodramatic.

"You must listen to me... we had to do it... he did unspeakable things to us... we... we had no choice but to do what he said... there are... so few of us left but the work is... almost finished and then... the evil...

you can't imagine... he's... he's coming back to destroy everything... everything... and everyone..." Maybe he was being a bit melodramatic after all. I'd never died, so I couldn't really say what goes through one's mind when they do die. It would be a pretty good practical joke to play, I would think, and everybody would have to admit you got the last laugh. *This is no joke.* I felt a bit guilty for doubting the poor gnome.

"Please... just find the boy." He coughed again, lighter this time. His time was running out. "Tell him that I escaped... I came back to warn..."

Then his eyes glazed over and he stared up at the clear sky. I recognized that look as if I'd seen it a thousand times. It's not the kind of look you ever forget. "...he will know what to do. You, my friend... it's all up to... you." The gnome's body went slack. I placed my hand over his face and closed his eyes. Rest in peace, little gnome.

I caught a flash of motion out of the corner of my eyes. I quickly and instinctively stuffed the passport, matches, and ring into my pockets before looking up. I could see it more clearly now... there was a robed figure heading straight for me, striding with absolute purpose. Another survivor? No, nobody on the zeppelin was wearing a robe. I felt a lump forming in the back of my throat.

So much for that good start on my new life.

Chapter the First: The Pleasure of Another's Company

I looked at the man with as much shock and confusion as he had when he looked at me.

"I can't believe it... it means you... And? And then the zeppelin! And the fire! And the altar says that...! Do you have any idea what all of this means?"

After all I'd been through I wanted to scream at him, but even under these circumstances being impolite simply wouldn't do. "What are you going on about?" In retrospect, perhaps that wasn't all that polite after all. He didn't seem to notice.

The man's jaw drops open.

"You speak! I mean... of course you speak... what am I, a blithering idiot? Wait! What did you say? Maybe I should be writing all of this down..."

He fumbles in the pockets of his robes.

"I'd like to help you out here, but I'm a bit confused." I smiled sweetly.

The man wrings his hands, obviously flustered.

"I'm at a loss here, I don't quite know what to do... uh... I mean you ARE the... of course you are, I mean you DO know who you are, right? Of course you do, what sort of brainless, half-baked question is that for the... uh... what exactly do you call yourself?"

I sighed. Smiling never got me what I wanted. Other girls could just slap that fake smile right on their faces and men would do anything for them, but never for me. "Please, sir. Slow down and tell me what it is that you're saying..." I was beginning to run out of patience.

"Please, forgive me. I'm making a bloody mess of this whole affair."

He takes a deep breath

"My name is Virgil, madam. And I'm new to the Panarii religion, er, your religion, and I... oh! Wait!"

He kneels on the ground in front of me, then hesitates, as if trying to remember something.

"I hereby... the Living One. Virgil am at your service."

Oh, another religious nutcase. That figures. Here I am standing amidst flaming wreckage and he wants to hand me a silly pamphlet. Still, perhaps I can use his gullibility to my advantage. After all, an escort could be helpful right about now. "Yeeess. Right. You may, uh, rise and serve me, loyal Virgil..."

"Please, listen. Look, I'm new to this, and the Panarii Church doesn't mean that this morning was my first sunrise, are we clear on that? I can see that you're as muddled about all of this as I am and I don't appreciate being made a fool of. You keep that up, and I'll tell you what... you can stow that Living One rubbish."

I had to bite my lip to keep from laughing. Perhaps I was going to like this fellow after all. "Sorry about that, Virgil. But please, explain this a bit further..."

"Yes, yes, of course. You say you're not him, not the incarnation of... er, what's his name? I can never remember... and I'm always getting him mixed up with the other fellow... the bad one. You, uh, well, you know how all of those old elven names sound the same... heh, heh... hmmm."

I couldn't make heads or tails of his babbling. *Good elves, bad elves? I'm not even an elf.* "I don't think I'm quite getting the gist of it, Virgil..."

"Yes... right... uh, just give me a moment here. You see... the Panarii... that's the religion that was formed around the things that he said, I mean that you said... oh, forget it. Let's start at the beginning. Or THIS beginning, since there is a lot more that came before this. You are the reincarnation of a powerful elf, who the Panarii worship, and whose name is, uh..."

Why oh why do I always get the weird ones? Can't I ever just meet a normal guy? Why couldn't Virgil here just be a local hunter that saw the crash and came to check on survivors? No, he's some whacko looking for the reincarnation of some obscure elf nobody cares about. Maybe some women would be happy to be worshipped, but I REALLY don't need this right now. Virgil began staring at me, so I faked interest, "Yes?"

"It is written in the scriptures. The Living One will live again on wings of fire. No wait, I think it says reborn on wings of light. Oh, blood and ashes! Why do elves always have to be so damn cryptic?" I had really had enough of this religious nonsense. "Do the scriptures

speaking of a dying gnome and a ring?"

"Virgil thinks for a moment. I don't know... but this business about the evil one returning... as I've said, I don't know the Panarii prophecies, but I think you were supposed to return and fight someone evil. Bloody hell, I should know more of this..."

Fight? I'm supposed to fight somebody now? This must be the least chivalrous man in all of Arcanum. "If this is confusing to you, imagine how I must feel."

"I would like to be of more help, but I am new to the Panarii religion myself. I should introduce you to my mentor, Elder Joachim. He can answer your questions. He is in Shrouded Hills, a town at the base of these mountains."

Heavens no. I don't need an escort that badly. He can stuff his little prophecies. "I've no interest in your foolishness. Good day." I surprised myself at how polite I was managing to be.

"Obviously, we're both involved in this now. Please, you must trust me. I know all of this sounds ludicrous, but if you'd just speak with Elder Joachim... I, uh, I don't want to fail him..."

I felt guilty. Virgil looked like a beaten puppy that had been kicked a few too many times, and here I was kicking him again. I wanted to grab ahold of him and shake him until he understood that whatever stupid prophecy this elder drilled into his head was just a bunch of lies, but that would only make him feel worse. "I am involved in nothing. Leave me alone."

"Please, I need to bring you to meet with my mentor, Elder Joachim. He's down the mountain in Shrouded Hills. He can tell us what we're meant to do."

I sighed deeply. I didn't need this. I really, really didn't. I couldn't turn him down, though. He looked so sad. "It doesn't look like I can get rid of you, so let's go." I only hoped that this Joachim fellow wouldn't turn out to be a serial murderer, with naive little Virgil here unwittingly playing fetch.

"Shrouded Hills is down to the southeast. We'll stop by the Panarii Shrine on the way out, see if it makes any of this clear."

He looks around at all the carnage.

"We should look for any other survivors before we leave, though. What do you think?"

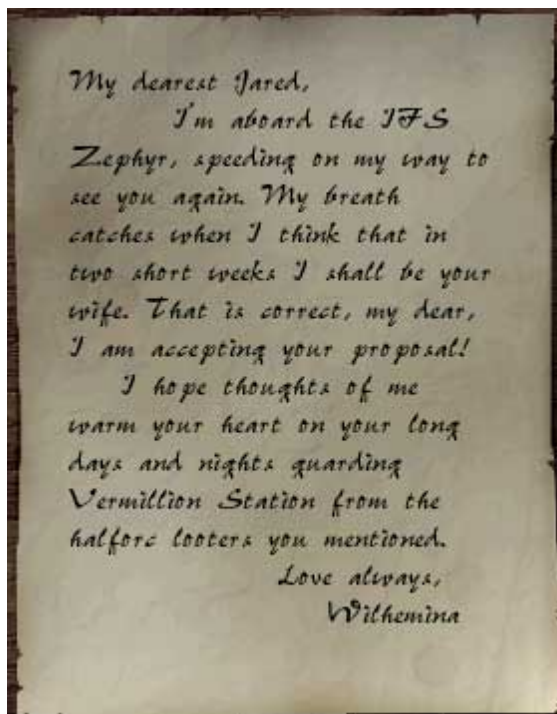
Nobody else survived. They couldn't have. Still, I could at least pay

my respects to the unfortunate souls that weren't as lucky as I was. I could be lying right there with them. Besides, plenty of them were loaded. They might have something useful. *It's a dreadful thing to do, but they won't be having need of it anymore and I could use all the help I can get.* "Agreed."

I quick pulled the passport and matchbox out of my pockets and took a glance at them. The passport was for a Preston Radcliffe. *Must be the gnome's name.* The matchbox was from the Roseborough Inn. I thought I'd heard of the place once or twice while I was living in Caladon but I wasn't overly familiar with it. It sounded out of my price range anyway.

Horace... if the zeppelin hadn't crashed I would've robbed you blind. I never got around to it, but I still feel bad about it. May you have many more daring heists in the afterlife.

Wilhemina... it breaks my heart to see you lying there. You were too young to die, too innocent. Perhaps your untimely death is a blessing in disguise. Now you will never know true pain. She was holding a letter loosely in her hands. I thought about leaving it there, but curiosity got the better of me. My curiosity always got the better of me; it was a terrible habit.



I closed my eyes to hold back the tears, not wanting Virgil to see me as weak. Tucking the letter gently into my pocket I resolved to deliver it to Jared if I ever found him. He deserved to know.

Victoria... looking at your corpse is like staring in a ghastly mirror. I could've been you, had my life gone just a little differently. Now I'll be lucky if I even end up in the same place as you when everything is over. I will be thinking about you for a long while. The Warrington family has lost much on this day.

One of the bodies I paid my respects to had a brand new camera lying on the ground next to him. It didn't look too good after the crash, but I picked it up figuring I'd fix it later if I had the time.

I spied one of the flying machines at the base of a cliff, tattered and broken. The pilot was lying on the ground next to it, a full-blooded ogre just like I had thought. The plaque on the machine read, "Maxim

Machinery, Caladon." *Maxim? This thing belonged to that old codger? I would've spent more time around him if I'd known he was up to making things like this.*

"What is this? It seems a strange flying device, but much smaller than the blimp... I've never seen anything like it."

I hadn't seen anything like it either and it quite fascinated me. I made a mental note to visit old Maxim again if I ever returned to Caladon. *Not bloody likely. I've barely made my escape and I'm already thinking of going back.* "Yes... it looks very much like the machine which attacked us..."

"And isn't that an Ogre among the wreckage? It seems very unlikely that an Ogre would have the intelligence to fly such a complex device..."

The scene of the bumbling oaf clumsily trying to operate the machine with his oversized fists before ultimately crashing it into the side of the zeppelin played through my mind. "They didn't, really... they destroyed themselves in the attack..."

"Do you see the strange amulet that he's wearing? And that symbol on its face... I don't recognize it. Do you?"

He was right. There was a strange amulet on the corpse, and I didn't recognize it either. I hadn't even noticed it until he pointed it out. "I can't say that I do..." It struck me as odd that I didn't recognize it.

"Ah. Something isn't quite right about all of this. I don't remember the scriptures talking about flying Ogres and the like. We'd better get to Shrouded Hills and find Elder Joachim as soon as possible..."

Virgil seemed to have an awful lot of misguided faith in this Joachim fellow, but I just didn't have the heart to disagree. It wasn't really doing any harm to let him have his idolatry. "Let's do so..."

I squatted down next to the ogre corpse and gently pulled the amulet off from around his neck. Perhaps once I was done with this silly religious business I could find somebody that would identify it for a modest sum. I bet there would be a lot of people who'd like to know who's responsible for burning down the IFS Zephyr.

The local wildlife was a bit aggressive, but I couldn't blame them after that horrendous crash. I almost felt bad for putting them down, but self defense came first. Old instincts die hard... I whirled about to the creature's backside in a single step, then thrust my dagger into it with the whole weight of my body. *Always strike right where they least*

expect it. No wonder Merle hated me.

At least Virgil was impressed. He seemed embarrassed at his lack of restraint, but I found it at least a little charming. He was so boring when he parroted all that religious mumbo jumbo. I could tell there was a real human being underneath that facade, slowly edging its way out.

"Are you blind? What in the gods....oh! I un mean better luck next time?"

Perhaps he wasn't so charming after all. *Why don't you try fighting in a silly, overpriced dress?* To his credit, he seemed to have some skill with rudimentary healing magic. *If only you'd studied some water magic maybe you could get the blood out of my dress before it stains. Oh, who am I kidding? It's already stained. Clothes like this are wasted on me.*

After a thorough search it was clear that nobody else had survived the crash. By the time our search was finished, however, night was rapidly falling. We headed into a nearby cave to take shelter until the morning. It was going to be a long journey to Shrouded Hills and I didn't want to travel at night if I didn't have to. Especially not in a dress.

Chapter the Second: A Lesson On Proper and Improper Shelters

Rats. How wonderful! I always wanted to spend the night in a rat infested cave with a naive, misguided religious nut. My new life wasn't turning out to be nearly as good as I hoped it would be. Then again, considering I started it by cleaning out my old home for quick gold it wasn't really all that different in the first place.

I'm normally not too fond of mages, but I had to grudgingly admit that Virgil's talents were quite handy. I suppose I never truly realized how long it had been since I actually had to live like this. I'd gone soft in the years in-between and my fumbling was embarrassing. *I am being wounded by rats. It doesn't get any lower than that.*

At the sight of the dead body I almost shrieked. Of all the caves to crash land next to, I had to crash land next to the cave with a human corpse in it. Something was out of place about it, though. The rats were aggressive, but the only reason I was even hurt was because I'd spent the better part of the last decade off the streets. Despite my reservations I was determined to ignore it. *I'm not about to let a silly little corpse get in the way of my shelter. It's just one corpse. I've seen corpses before.*

This spirit appears to be in pain.

"Please... I beg of you... the pain!"

As I drew near to the corpse a haunting red spectre rose out of it, facing me with malevolent eyes. The shriek that had been begging to escape my throat made its way out then. My panicked voice was absurdly loud in the confines of the cramped little cave. To my surprise, Virgil seemed almost completely calm. If anything he was concerned about how I was handling it, but the ghost didn't bother him at all. I made it a point to ask him more about himself at a time

when we were not being confronted by the tortured spirits of the dead.

The spectre spoke to us, then, with a raspy voice that echoed despite the small space and sent shivers up my spine. I was no stranger to death, but this was almost more than I could take. My body trembled and the desire to run welled up in the pit of my stomach, but my curiosity got the better of my fear and I asked, "What happened to you?" *My curiosity is going to get me killed one day.*

"I was... cursed by an evil priest. My name was Charles Brehgo... my friend and I asked only for something to eat... some sustenance... we were poor, wandering... and he cursed us... my friend was cursed with madness... attacked me, killed me... the pain. I am cursed to be tied to this realm, unable to be released... please... I need your help..." It hadn't been rats after all. At least... not as far as I could tell. The ghost was a very poor liar, though. The cave had obvious trappings of a semi-permanent hideout, he certainly hadn't just stopped in to take shelter for a night. Besides, the foothills around the Stonewall Mountains weren't exactly known for their evil cults. I'm sure there's a few, but they have to have better things to do than cursing people who hide out in caves. *I'm hiding out in a cave, too... or at least attempting to. What does that say about me?* "I don't know... why should I?"

"I can tell you something... valuable."

At last, now this ghost was speaking my language. I definitely needed more money after having wasted so much on a stupid dress and a damned zeppelin ticket. Whatever this ghost's true story was, it didn't really matter as long as I got paid in the end. I couldn't really get him to tell me the truth anyway, so it didn't seem like I'd ever know. "I'm listening."

"First... I need you to kill the priest. Arbalah. He lives here"

He points at my map.

"Only his death will free me..."

Killing? No, it was an accident! I am not a killer by choice! A horrible image flashed across my mind very briefly, an image I'd been desperately trying to forget. Sudden movement, then a flash accompanied by a loud bang.

The ghost could've offered me wealth and power beyond my wildest dreams and my answer still would have been no. Defending myself

was one thing, but I no longer had it in me to wantonly kill another human being whom I had no quarrel with. Even one as low as myself still has a code of morals to follow. "I am not a killer. Good bye." I could've tolerated a simple corpse, but a murderous spectre was too much. It wouldn't be my first night without shelter.

Although travelling during the night was dangerous, I felt it was a better idea than hanging around the zeppelin ruins. Who knows when the next ogre would show up flying one of Maxim's strange machines. Virgil and I headed towards the only exit out of the valley when we encountered that silly religious altar he had mentioned earlier. I suspected I was in for another sermon.

"There... the altar should clear things up for us a bit. Hmm... it says, uh... "And the spirit of Nasrudin shall be reborn on wings of fire in hills shrouded in fog, and fight the last battle with the evil one."

Right on time. I would've let out a sigh if it wouldn't betray just how little I wanted to hear what Virgil was going on about. I didn't dislike the fellow, but all of his religious nonsense was rapidly getting on my nerves. Especially since I seemed to be at the center of it. I thought that maybe if I tested his faith he would shut up. "And the evil one? Who is that?"

Virgil takes a deep breath, exhaling slowly.

"I'm sorry, but I don't know."

Virgil chuckles.

"I guess we'd better find out, considering you're supposed to fight him..."

It never failed. This man was definitely not just another simpleton, babbling the same vague prophecies over and over again, handed down by priests and elders for god knows how long. When he acted like a real person I actually found him at least the slightest bit charming. That had its limits, though. I didn't like the idea of being sent off to fight anybody, let alone a 'last battle with the evil one'. Nevermind that whole worship and protect me nonsense. "I'm glad you find this amusing, because I don't at all..."

"I'm sorry. I know this is all a bit much considering what you've just been through. Let's just get to Shrouded Hills..."

Damnation! Now he's got that puppy dog look again. It makes me feel bad no matter what I've done. Perhaps guilt is an instinctual reflex of mine. I sighed, unsure of what to say. In the end I settled on nothing. If I said anything he'd either get hurt more or he'd be tempted to write it

down. I cared for neither.

In the distance I saw a man with distinct elven features begin to approach. He was wearing a dark, hooded robe to mostly conceal himself, but the shape of his face was a dead giveaway. The look in his eyes was searching, calculating... he was headed straight for me. If that weren't suspicious enough all of this business Virgil was mentioning about elves had set me on edge. I didn't trust this man one bit.

"Hold there... what are you doing up here?"

It struck me as odd that the man was acting almost hostile instead of concerned. For him to arrive so quickly he would've had to be near enough to hear the crash, if not see it outright. Why, then, was he not interested in the survivors? This man would get nothing out of me. "I just saw the acc..." Virgil interrupted me.

Virgil whispers to me.

"I mean no disrespect, uh, madam... but I don't trust this bastard one bit. Bloody convenient he happened to show up here just now, don't you think?"

He seems to remember himself.

"Excuse my language, madam..."

I wasn't the only one who noticed, then. Virgil seemed to have more he wanted to say, and it would likely do me good to at least hear it. It is best to consider all of one's options and all that. "What do you recommend, Virgil?"

"I've, uh, dealt with buggers, er, individuals like this before. Perhaps you'll let me talk with him for a few minutes...?"

On the one hand it would be an interesting sight to watch, but on the other hand... I didn't feel comfortable having Virgil sticking up for me. I was torn, but in the end I decided that I had to learn all over again how to take care of myself. I learned the hard way the first time and it was the quickest way to learn again. Practice makes perfect, after all. "Listen, Virgil. I do the talking. I'll hear no more of it..." I winced. That was perhaps a bit harsher than I had intended. Virgil seems to get angry, about to say something more, but restrains himself.

"Fine... I'm sure you know best what to do. But be careful with him... I don't like the look in his eye."

I knew I'd gone too far, and I felt terrible. I instinctively adopted a motherly tone, "I'll do what I think is best, Virgil..." *Did my mother*

ever say things like that to me? Where did I pick it up from?

The man gives Virgil a hard look, then turns to me, nodding.

"Yes, that's more reasonable. Now, why are you here?"

The man was an utter scoundrel. He could tell that we were onto him, yet he persisted as if we owed a proper explanation to him. Nothing else would more quickly have lies spilling out of my lips, although I wasn't exactly a stranger to lying either. *Everybody lies, don't they? I'm not any worse than they are.* "I saw there was a disturbance and came to investigate..."

"Oh, really? So you weren't on the blimp?! What were you doing up here in the first place?"

When am I ever going to learn that sweet and innocent never works for me? The man's peculiar suspicion made me uncomfortable. There was little reason to believe I was on the zeppelin, it was far more sensible to assume otherwise. I didn't like the way his posture shifted, either. Something was not right about the situation at all. I placed my hand on the hilt of my dagger, "Are you doubting my word, sir? I wouldn't recommend it..."

The man eyes me suspiciously.

"Quite a ways out in the wilderness, don't you think? Strange place to be camping... are you hunting, or something else?"

This man was too sure of himself, too cocky. I know he noticed my hostile intent and he didn't even skip a beat. There were foul intentions behind his presence and I wanted no part of them. Perhaps it would've been better if I'd let Virgil deal with the man after all. Keeping my hand near my dagger I made as if to brush past the man rudely. "I've had enough of your questions. Good day to you..."

"I'm afraid that's not an option here. You see, I'm here to see if there were any survivors..."

He stepped in my way with a sinister grin. My dagger was in my hand within an instant. "I don't like your tone, sir. Get out of my way..." *Go ahead, I dare you to try something. You think I won't fight back, you arrogant bastard? I'm not dying that easily.*

"And I'm making SURE there are no survivors. Now you die..."

Just what has that damned zeppelin ticket gotten me into? This is just my bloody luck. There was far more to this zeppelin business than I had ever anticipated, but I didn't really have any time to consider it - there was an overconfident elf in desperate need of a good stabbing.

Just two inches to the left of the spine... and down goes the elf. It's all starting to come back to me... but is that really what I want? Do I want to go back to that? Dozens of thoughts came rushing to the surface of my mind, but I pushed them back down. I would have time to think about all of this later. For now all I needed to worry about was that somebody wanted me dead.

"This man was a hired killer. Someone doesn't want anyone walking away from this blimp crash..."

Really? I hadn't noticed he was trying to kill me, I just stabbed him for the fun of it. What kind of a fool do you take me for? I thought about it for a moment, unconsciously patting the ring in my pocket. The gnome had seemed so serious about whatever he was referring to... I really didn't think he was joking. I could only assume the gnome, the deliberate attack on the zeppelin, and now this assassin all had something in common. "Yes... it seems that way. Perhaps it has to do with the gnome...?"

"Hmmm. Yes, that may very well be the case. It might be a good idea to find out who owns that ring..."

I certainly didn't know a damned thing about jewelry except for what it was likely to fetch at a junk shop. Even then I had no skill at appraisal... I'd just 'found' more than a few rings in my past. The need for information was as good of a reason as any to visit this town that Virgil had been wanting to drag me to. I could at least get a warm bath, if nothing else. "Perhaps there will be some answers in Shrouded Hills..."

"Yes, let's go to Shrouded Hills," he sounded satisfied. I pulled out my map. *It's a good thing I didn't get on the zeppelin unprepared.*



I noticed the mark that the spectre placed on my map, where the supposed evil priest lived. *When am I ever going to learn that my curiosity only ever gets me into trouble?*

"Virgil, I think I'd like to make a bit of a detour first. It'll be quick, I promise."

Chapter the Third: We Cannot Run From Our Past

The smell of fresh earth greeted my nose as I approached the lonely old shack in the middle of nowhere. Memories assaulted my senses, nearly stopping me dead in my tracks. *Nathaniel*... I almost turned around, but I'd already come this far. If I couldn't learn to live with my past then the life that I'd scraped together and narrowly clawed my way into would be gone in a flash.

My heart sank when I saw the gravestones. 'Jamilah, Beloved Wife and Mother', 'Saif, Beloved Son'. Memories... too many memories. Not enough time had passed, I wasn't ready to face this yet. I clenched my fists and squeezed my eyes shut, trying to hold back the tears. I took a deep breath, and then another... I forced my eyes open, feeling them burn beneath the cold night air.

Virgil was staring at me uncomfortably. He seemed like he wanted to say something, but at the same time he didn't dare. *It's not my fault you've decided to worship me*. I muttered a half-hearted, "sorry" to him and pushed myself towards the door, knocking on it lightly. "Come in." A voice called from inside.

"What is it, child?"

I gently opened the door, but what was on the inside was even worse than what was on the outside. There were dried pools of blood staining the hardwood floor. From the smell I could tell they were still relatively fresh. The blood, the graves outside.... I closed my eyes and breathed deeply, trying not to notice, trying not to remember.

I scarcely even noticed the elder man sitting next to a small table in the center of the room. Several wrinkles gently hung from his face. His calm, deep voice soothed me, beckoned me closer, "What is it, child?" I still felt a bit flustered, but I had regained enough composure to at least ask him, "Who might you be?" *I've got to pull*

myself together. Even I'm not that stupid. Who the hell else would be at Arbalah's house?

This wizened old priest seems to be in some pain.

"I am Arbalah,"

He winces

"and you are?"

Every time I introduce myself I can always hear the more fortunate children taunting me, teasing me. *Sammy, Sammy, son of Merle. Doesn't know that she's a girl.* "I am Samantha Colburn." Compared to the other memories I was fighting back being teased mercilessly was a pleasant one.

"Well, Samantha Colburn, what brings you to my humble farm?"

You see, a murderous spectre asked me to kill you. I declined, but thought I'd show up just for the hell of it anyway. You know, see if maybe you were dead and I could take credit. While I didn't feel right lying to the man, I couldn't exactly be honest either. God knows I felt awful about it. I shouldn't have even stopped by. "I'm simply traveling about... what happened to you?" *Good god, what is wrong with me? I've just passed by the fresh graves of his wife and child and I've got the bloody nerve to ask him what happened? I'm horrible.*

"My family was brutally slaughtered by two madmen, Brehgo and Fahrikus. I was left for dead. I invited them into my house, offered them sustenance, and they repaid me by killing my wife and children and stealing the only thing I had of any value, a sacred religious artifact."

As much as I hated being honest, I couldn't continue lying to the man either. Fighting against that instinct only made me say awful things. I had to be myself, even if it was less than pleasant. "I met the spirit of one of those killers..."

"One of them is dead already? I shouldn't be surprised! Probably killed by the other, I would assume. Dreadfully evil people, they were..."

Arbalah's voice was lighter now, somewhat less pained. It was a bit startling, but I couldn't really blame him for taking pleasure in his assailant's death. In fact, I almost envied him. "Brehgo told me your curse made his friend turn on him..."

"No, I believe that was the curse of greed. Their souls will never leave this plane of existence, but that was the only stain on them. If I had to guess, Fahrikus decided he didn't want to share the ill-gotten gains with anyone. As I said, they were truly evil individuals..."

The only evil that I put any stock in was exactly what Arbalah was referring to: the evil in the hearts of men. His pain was too close to my own for me to not sympathize. I could only express sympathy. "I am sorry for your loss."

"Thank you for your kind words... but there is something else. I need to recover the sacred artifact they stole... it is very important to me. I need it to pray to my gods effectively. Did Brehgo say anything, give any clue as to where it might be?"

I gritted my teeth. *Your wife and child just died and all you can think of is a material possession?* I suddenly lost a lot of respect for the well-composed man standing before me. Although I'm sure my negative opinion of religion didn't help, it simply felt wrong that the man seemed more upset about his missing property than the death of his family. "No, he did not." I silently seethed.

He leans close to me.

"I know it is none of your affair, but could you assist me in trying to locate what is rightfully mine?"

If you wanted a shoulder to cry on, somebody to share your pain with, I would happily oblige. Instead, you merely care about your damned idol.

"That depends on what it would be worth to you..." *Sympathy is all you get for free.*

"I am not one who gathers material possessions about himself. I have nothing to offer you for your help, but my gratitude."

I bit my lip gently, unsure of myself. Even if I didn't understand why the idol was so important to the man, he still had an immense amount of pain. It didn't really matter if I agreed with him or not, lessening his pain in any way I could would still be a nice gesture. It was something I'd never have done in my previous life, and now that I had a chance to start over I was seriously considering it. "Hmmm... I suppose helping you would be the right thing to do..." I sounded like I was weighing the prospect of eternal damnation against the effort required to do this good deed, but that simply wasn't the case. I already knew I was damned.

"Excellent! Your friend, the late Brehgo, might have some information he could impart to you regarding the location of my sacred possession..."

It still struck me as wrong, but that was beside the point. I had decided to help this man and that's just what I was going to do. "I will return when I have retrieved your property, sir." I didn't like the idea of visiting that damned spectre again, but I didn't have much other

choice. *I will do this good deed. Perhaps if there were more people willing to do the right thing I wouldn't be where I am now.*

"Please... help me..."

Virgil was surprisingly quiet as we headed back to the crash site. I wondered what he was thinking about, and if it really bothered him that I seemed to be avoiding Shrouded Hills. In truth I supposed that I was avoiding it. It made me nervous to say the least. I definitely did not want to meet with Joachim, but that was just an extension of how little I trusted people. I barely even trusted Virgil and he'd been nothing but nice to me.

We arrived back at the cave and approached Brehgo for a second time. "Please... help me..." he rasped. I was expecting him this time so I didn't so much as let out a peep. It made me proud.

This spirit appears to be in great pain.

"Please... I beg of you... the pain..."

Hmm... I hadn't really thought about this part. How exactly do I ask him about this anyway? "I, uh, need to talk to the "friend" that killed you..."

"Hahaha... the pain..."

He composes himself.

"So, you've heard I killed him. Bravo... my friend. I applaud you..."

The sound that issued forth from the Brehgo's ghastly mouth was horrifying. I wanted to run, or to scream. My legs began to tremble and I would've run if I could only get the damn things to start moving. "Tell me where Fahrkus is!"

"Why should I tell you that? I will still be here... for eternity..."

The sound quieted down, and I calmed slightly. The longer I suppressed my instinct to flee the better my chances of recovering the idol. *Well, if anybody deserves to be lied to it's this cretin.* "I convinced Arbalah to release you if you help me."

"You would, wouldn't you? If there is one thing about you walking types that you'll do, it's the right thing. Anyway, I don't like being tied to this pain..."

He points to a location on my map.

"Fahrkus is here."

Oh how wrong you are, Charles Brehgo. You don't know me in the slightest. "Thank you. By the way, I lied... you still get to rot here forever!" Perhaps it was harsh, but I had no sympathy for the spirit. Besides, better I tell him now than he figure it out sometime later. At least now he knows.

"Aaaaah! No, it cannot be! The pain! Please, I will haunt you! I will cause your loved ones... please, release me..."

I had no more reason to fight my own instincts, and so I ran. I ran so fast that I nearly tripped over my dress several times. I was clear out of the valley before stopping to catch my breath. Virgil was right behind me, holding onto the map that I had accidentally dropped when I began my escape. *How does he manage to keep so calm?*

Following the map once again I arrived at a lone, run-down shack. It looked weathered and mostly abandoned, but little signs suggested that somebody was here. The window was propped open, and I caught the faint scent of sweat. I crouched down and slipped off my shoes, resting my bare feet flat on the ground. Quietly and cautiously I crept forward, paying special mind to keep my movements steady and evenly distribute my weight along the ground to make a minimum of noise.

I got to the door of the shack where the sweaty scent was almost overpowering. Without warning the door swung open and the man inside stared at me with as much surprise as I was staring at him. His look of shock turned to one of disdain as he glared down at me.

"I do not have time for the likes of you."

What kind of a greeting is that? What the hell does he think I'm here for? He doesn't think...? Ugh. "I would appreciate you addressing me with respect, sir."

He screams and shields his face with his hands.

"P..p..please, madam, don't hurt me! I am sorry for any offense I have caused!"

Well, I guess he doesn't think I'm here for 'entertainment' anymore. If the tears in this dress are giving that kind of an impression I really need to sew it back up. No matter, if he's that afraid of me I can push the advantage. "I am here for Arbalah. You will return what is his, or you will die."

He suddenly looks very unsure of himself.

"What.. what do you mean? I, uh, I have no idea what you are talking about."

Is there a school for lying? How do other people get so damned good at it? Maybe I'm just out of practice. I could feel my advantage slipping away. I panicked and grabbed him around the collar, just like the time I grabbed little Steven and threw him to the ground for teasing

me. "This is your last warning, you spineless worm!"

"Here! Here it is! Please don't hurt me!"

He hurriedly hands me the artifact.

Virgil gave me a level stare, reassessing just what he thought of me. *Well, I never pretended to be perfectly ladylike.* I stuffed the idol in my purse, grateful that I wouldn't have to resort to any real violence.

"Thank you. You may live, for now. Good day."

Virgil and I headed off in the direction of Arbalah's house. When we were out of sight of Fahrkus' shack Virgil said, "You know, madam, I just wanted to say that I think you're doing the right thing."

I didn't really know how to respond to that. If he'd wanted to insult me I would've been inspecting it, but then again I suppose worshippers don't often insult their gods. *Ugh.* I wasn't used to strangers treating me kindly. "Your opinion is noted, Virgil." *Well if that didn't sound the least bit grateful. Even a curt 'thanks' would've been better than that.*

Upon our arrival I knocked gently again before letting myself in.

"Always an honor."

His voice was as calm and soothing as ever. It reassured me that was Virgil said was true, I had definitely done the right thing. I wasn't sure I could get used the feeling it brought. "I have retrieved your artifact." I pulled the idol out of my purse and set it down on the nearby table.

"I thank you, as do the spirits of my ancestors. I must admit to having lied to you before as well..."

He smiles a kindly smile.

"I do have something to give you, something of immeasurable value. I bestow my blessing upon you... everyone you meet will now react more favorably to you."

I felt just an inkling of magic caress my skin as Arbalah took hold of his idol. It was slight, but I could tell he had done something... he certainly wasn't lying. I felt embarrassed because I didn't deserve it. My thoughts kept drifting to our earlier conversation where I asked him for a reward, and wondering if he would've done this had I never asked. I could only stammer out "Thank you." If every good deed made one feel so guilty no wonder the world was such an awful place.

Without another word I nodded to Arbalah and he nodded back to me. I turned and left him in peace. "Thank you for accompanying me on my detour, Virgil. Let's head to Shrouded Hills now."

"Let's do so, Madam." He never once complained.

Chapter the Fourth: Hills Shrouded In Fog

On the way to Shrouded Hills, I heard noises coming towards us through the forest. Thinking we were being set upon yet again by more assassins I drew my dagger and crouched low to the ground, my eyes hunting for the oncoming assailants. The noises grew louder as they approached and they were accompanied by a deep, vicious grunting. The noises made sense, then. Only an orcish assassin could be this loud.

Then it sprang from the bushes nearby and nearly tackled poor Virgil! If I hadn't been so frightened I would've laughed. It was no orc, nor an assassin - it was a bear! I hadn't fought many bears before, but bears could be stabbed just as well as any man, provided you were willing to get close enough.

Virgil brought out that clumsy old staff of his and began swinging away uselessly. I was glad he was trying to help, but the bear was just shaking off his blows. Slowly, I crept behind the bear and flipped my dagger around to improve my striking strength. When the bear lurched forward to attack Virgil once again, I struck. My blade flashed through the air in an instant, piercing the bear's side just in front of his back right leg. It growled ferociously and turned at me, but I was already gone, behind it once more. I struck it again and again until it finally slumped to the ground, lifeless. I felt a pang of guilt at killing an animal, but it did attack us first. Better guilty than dead.

The rest of the trip to Shrouded Hills was uneventful. Things seemed to be looking up for a change. Even my annoying little dress seemed to be stretching and tearing in just the right places so that it wasn't nearly as unbearably restrictive as it was before. I was starting to like the damned thing. I made a note to sew it up in Shrouded Hills so I

wouldn't look quite so much like street trash. Even if I was street trash, I didn't want to look it.

Upon our arrival in Shrouded Hills Virgil directed me to the inn where Joachim was staying.

I was nervous, staring at the door to the inn. I had found a nice, quiet place to rest for the first time since my departure from Caladon and yet instead of resting I was willingly meeting with a half-crazed loon that might just as soon try to kill me as worship me. Virgil took the lead and I grudgingly followed. He lead me into the inn and down the hallway to the last door on the left. I stopped dead in my tracks when I reached the door. I smelled blood.

"Good god! What's happened here? These men... I've never seen them before..."

Don't you see, Virgil? Joachim isn't who you think he is.... I felt pity for Virgil. There could be no doubt now that Joachim was a killer, but Virgil seemed to have so much respect for him. I wondered how he would take it once the initial shock wore off. Giving him his space, I explored the room a bit further. On the far side I found a note lying conspicuously on the ground. If I'd traipse across the countryside merely for the sake of my curiosity I couldn't very well resist reading a little note. It was even more tempting than locked doors, but not by much.

Virgil-

I assume you are not alone.
As you can see, there are people
in Shrouded Hills looking for
me. Luckily for me, these
fellows were easily dispatched.
Do not speak with anyone
about the zeppelin crash, or
your new companion's involvement
with it. When you are able to
make your way to Tarant, check
the telegram office there. I will
leave a message telling you
where to contact me.

Joachim

Hm. So that's his excuse. I didn't like how much he seemed to know about me despite my never having met him. It unnerved me; made me feel like he was just around the corner, watching me.

"Sorry to interrupt, but it seems Joachim has discovered something. These individuals"

He motions to the corpses on the ground

"seem to be a part of some larger plot against you."

It's possible, I suppose, but isn't it also possible that Joachim killed them to make us think that? It wasn't worth asking him. Given the two choices I knew which one he'd favor already, and even if I thought I could convince him otherwise I didn't want to shatter his hopes. As long as I continued to avoid meeting with this Joachim for as long as possible it wouldn't do me any harm to play along and Virgil would be happier for it I was sure. I almost envied him... he could remain hopeful because he was naive. It made me long for naivete. I chose my words carefully, trying not to upset him again. "It looks that way. Tell me Virgil... who exactly is this Joachim?"

"He was... well... someone who helped me out when I needed it. I met him in a small village at a Panarii temple. I was... a bit down on my

luck."

Virgil looks away.

"He showed me that you don't always have to take what life gives you... that there's always a better path, and that it's always your choice to travel it..."

Now I was starting to get interested. *I've been meaning to ask you about yourself anyway.* I didn't want to force him to face painful memories, but perhaps I didn't give him enough credit. Could it be that he chose to be this naive? "What do you mean, 'down on your luck'? What had happened?" If we had as much in common as I was beginning to suspect, I might be able to learn something from Virgil after all.

"I'd rather not talk about it anymore."

His face hardens.

"But Joachim is a great man, well-versed in the ways of the Panarii, and a lot more than we are. Let's get out of here and get to Tarant." *Fair enough, Virgil. I suppose if you asked me the same thing I wouldn't tell you just yet either.* It could wait. "Alright, Virgil. Perhaps we'll talk more of this later..." Virgil didn't respond. He seemed lost in thoughts, and I couldn't blame him. I had already suspected, but it was then that I knew for sure we had something closely in common.

It looked to me like we both needed a good rest so I headed back to the innkeeper. "Greetings, good sir." He gave me a friendly smile as any good innkeeper always will, whether they like you or not.

"What can I help you with?" he asked cheerfully.

I tried to be polite, but direct. "I would like a room for the night."

The innkeeper was pleasantly polite as well, "Oh, but of course, madam. That will be 25 gold coins, please."

It was nice dealing with folk that weren't trying to stab me before I could stab them. "Here you are," I quickly counted out 25 coins from my purse and placed them in his hand. My funds were rapidly dwindling and I resolved to do something about them soon.

The innkeeper counted the coins once again to be sure then smiled again.

"Thank you, milady! You will find your room just down the hall..."

You will have use of the room for tonight only. The door will be unlocked. I do hope you enjoy your stay."

It was obviously a memorized speech, but at the moment I didn't much care.

Virgil and I retired to the room for some much needed rest. The two of us lied awake on separate beds, facing away from each other, unable to sleep due to the myriad of thoughts racing through our minds. It was a long night.

Chapter the Fifth: A Hard Laborer's Search For Wages

I woke up groggily in the morning after a fitful night's sleep. It felt like my entire body ached. Virgil was still asleep, if you could even call that sleep, so I took the extra time to draw up a nice, warm bath. I suspected the past week's worth of travels had made their impact upon my person and I wouldn't have the freshest of odors. That was just my excuse for languishing in the tub until the water grew tepid.

Virgil was awake and ready to go by the time I returned to our room. Although I knew he'd object, I felt it was only proper to inform him that I wouldn't be heading for Tarant straightaway. "After lastnight I'm not so eager to hit the road again quite so soon. Besides, my purse is getting awfully light. What say we ask around and see if there are any odd jobs to do before we continue on?"

He sighed a bit and mulled it over. I could tell he wanted to contact Joachim as soon as possible. He started to protest, but then thought better of it. I suppose he might've been afraid of making me angry again. All I got out of him was a half-hearted, "Yes, Madam." Even that was more than I expected, so I didn't press my luck. Wordlessly, I headed out the door.

My first order of business was to brush up on my fighting skills a bit. I caught a guard as he passed by and paid him a few coin for giving me a bit of advice. He seemed a bit put off at first, but when I explained my reasoning to him he acquiesced quickly enough. Woman or no, it's prudent for one to know how to fight if they're going to be traipsing all about the countryside... and who better to ask than a man whose very job is fighting?

"Is there something else?"

It would also be prudent to find out where I might be able to learn a bit more. I couldn't be too careful when I knew there were assassins

after me. "Where can I find an expert trainer for melee?"

"I would try looking in Blackroot or on the Isle of Despair for a Melee Expert."

Isle of Despair?! Good heavens! It seemed like my journey might have to stray towards Blackroot sometime soon. I wasn't overly familiar with the city, but it had to be better than the Isle of Despair and learning how to fight better was quite the high priority. I thanked the guard and started asking around for work.

The first place I came across was an interesting old shop with dozens of cute little knickknacks and gadgets. The shopkeeper greeted me eccentrically as I entered, "Good day, miss! It is a pleasure." His voice was nasal and he spoke just a bit too quickly. I didn't really like him, but it was important to always be polite regardless, "And you are, good sir?"

"I'm Ristezze, importer of fine goods and rarities from all over the world. An incredible assortment of fantastical oddities from the four corners of Arcanum and beyond! You're looking for something specific, yes?"

By the gods, that voice...! Listening to the man speak was like enduring the sound of nails against a chalkboard. His very demeanor was pompous and almost insulting. I tried to excuse myself, "Uh... no. I really just chanced to stop by..."

"No one just STUMBLES into Ristezze... Ristezze always has something for everyone, no? Take it."

The man was really getting on my nerves. Not only did he seem incapable of proper speech, but his insistence that I browse his shop only made me want to leave all the faster. I gritted my teeth. If he was going to force me to stick around he could at least stop trying to annoy me to death. "Must you always refer to yourself in the third person?"

"Eh? Ristezze is Ristezze, no? Ristezze can only be what Ristezze is. Ristezze..."

Make it stop. Pointing out his flaws only made things worse. If I had to put up with this I was damn well going to try and get something out of it. I cut right to the point, "Enough said, good man. A few questions..."

"What can Ristezze do for you?"

Surely if he deals as far and wide as he claims to he'll know something about the strange ring the gnome gave me. "What could you tell me

about this ring?" I held it out in my palm for him to inspect, carefully prepared to pull it back in if he got grabby.

"Interesting. Hmmm, a fine piece of jewelry. What exactly do you want from Ristezze?"

I suspected I wouldn't get anywhere by asking him about the initials, but since that was the real goal of my search I thought I'd try. "Do you know who the initials G.B. belong to?"

"G.B.? No one that I know in Shrouded Hills would own such a high-quality piece of jewelry. More likely, they'd melt it down and use it for nails... oh, the stupidity! How Ristezze suffers!"

Ugh, I wanted to tell him to stuff it; I have no tolerance for the bourgeoisie. I wondered if I might be able to take advantage of his eccentricity, though. "What do you think something like this is worth?"

"Hmmm. Something like this... I don't know. It's a little risky... I could offer gold pieces for it, and that's a gift, my friend. With my luck, it's probably a fake or it's stolen... but gold pieces it is!"

Not only is he a pompous windbag, he's also a cheapskate. "Forget it. What can you tell me about the imprint of P. Schuyler & Sons?"

"P. Schuyler & Sons? A very important piece of history, my friend. Ristezze has information, no? What have you to offer Ristezze?"

Damned fop. He's going to hold it against me for keeping the ring. "Ahhh. Maybe you don't know as much as I'd thought." I hoped to trick him into blurting out what I wanted to know, trying to prove his worth...

"Ristezze sees that you never learned the graces of business etiquette. Let's cut right to the chase then. Ristezze has information you need." ...but the bloody bastard was as shrewd as he was eccentric. "Fine. What is it you're looking for?"

He scratched his chin thoughtfully as though he really had to think to answer the question, "Well... Ristezze is a collector of strange and wonderful things... perhaps there are a few objects you could add to Ristezze's collection?"

Good god, out with it man! "What things are you looking for exactly?"

"Two things actually! If you were able to locate a camera—that technological wonder!—or something of Bessie Toone's, Ristezze might tell you about P. Schuyler & Sons and where you might find them."

Well, I did have a camera... but I was hoping to get around to fixing

it up later. I do so enjoy tinkering with things. The other thing, though... that was a name I didn't recognize. Probably some backwater legend. "Who is Bessie Toone?"

Ristezze sighed as though it pained him to have to explain it to me. "Bessie Toone was the owner of the old mine just north of town. Rumor has it that one day she walked up to the mine, fired all of the workers, and disappeared into the caves. She was never seen again..." he trailed off.

Am I supposed to get all spooked now? "Sounds like a weird old crone," I muttered.

"Yes, but she's quite a legend in Shrouded Hills... and it seems that her myths and its associated paraphernalia are all the rage in Tarant these days."

I knew it. Damned urban myths. What a bunch of hogwash. "Where should I look for her things? In the mine?"

Ristezze nodded at me slowly, treating me like a dullard for even asking. "Yes. Ristezze would say that is the best place to search."

It was a valid question, you dandy bastard. "I'll look into it and return..."

I left the shop and continued on my search for easy coin since the tightwad certainly wasn't going to be parting with any. I happened upon a friendly gentleman by the name of Lloyd Gurloes, a blacksmith by trade. He was rough and well-muscled, his voice clear and polite. This was a significant improvement from Ristezze.

I noticed a few rusty old locks sitting in a bin just inside his shop and a devious thought formed in the back of my mind. "Know much about locks, do you?"

He nodded, "That I do."

I smiled sweetly, "Know much about picking them?"

He eyed me up and down, reconsidering his initial impressions. "A bit, perhaps. What makes you ask?"

"Well... I'm not as young as I once was. It's been a few years since I had any practice and I was wondering if you could teach me anything. Locks had to have advanced a bit over the last decade..."

He gave me a stern look and shook his head slowly, "I'm afraid you're asking the wrong person, Madam. I'm just a country blacksmith."

I thought for a moment then asked, "Do you know where I might find somebody who knows more?"

"Hmmm... I'm not quite sure... try either Black Root or Dernholm... I think you'll find what you're looking for there..."

Hmm, Blackroot again? Sorry, Virgil, Tarant will definitely have to wait.

"May I indulge upon you to answer more questions?"

He nodded, softening a bit at my politeness. "Certainly, Madam. What else can I help you with?"

Now was my chance to ask him about a job. "How has business been lately?"

"Business? Oh, I suppose it's never outstanding here in Shrouded Hills... we're a small town and a simple folk. But to be honest, I've had trouble getting my hands on any good ore for smithing... it's hard to bring anything out of the old Bessie Toone mine..."

Perfect. I was headed that way anyway. This'll be easy money. "What type of ore do you need?"

"Well, madam, I'm in dire need of some pure ore. I'll not make a blade without it. If you could find some, I might be obliged to make you a dagger out of whatever was left."

Now that was a proposal I hadn't considered. *Well, he IS a blacksmith.*

"A dagger would be wonderful, good sir. That sounds like a good trade... I'll do it."

He nodded respectfully, "Take care of yourself, Madam."

"And you as well, sir," I replied.

I next happened upon a strange little shop a bit distant from the rest of the town. It made me feel uneasy to approach it, but Shrouded Hills wasn't a very big town and I was rapidly running out of options

for replenishing my dwindling coin purse. Inside I smelled burning incense, a foul and pungent smell. There were assorted vials scattered about messily and a few scrolls sat on a shelf. Now I understood what had made me feel so uneasy.

"Good day, sir. Might I ask who you are?"

"I'm Jongle Dunne, learned wizard and alchemist. If you've a problem in Shrouded Hills of a magickal nature, I'm the person to see. You've caught me at a bad time, friend. Perhaps we could speak later..."

I cut right to the chase. I didn't want to spend any more time in this weird old shop than I had to. "It's a pleasure to meet you. Might I be of assistance?"

He raised his eyebrow at my question, "Well... perhaps. I've a problem here in Shrouded Hills of a most delicate nature. Strictly confidential, if you get my meaning..."

Ooh... this sounds like it'll pay well enough. "Of course... might I ask you a few questions about it?"

He chuckled darkly, "Certainly."

I wasn't afraid of getting my hands dirty, and it was obvious that's what this was going to take. Travel gets expensive, and most strangers aren't granted the luxury of credit. "What is the nature of your problem, Mr. Dunne?"

"Well..."

He leans towards me, looking around secretively.

"There's a conspiracy here in Shrouded Hills, a dark plan full of mystery and intrigue..."

I was intrigued to say the least. What was it with Gnomes and being so damned melodramatic anyway? "Interesting. And exactly what seems to be going on...?"

His face turned to a dark scowl as he explained his troubles to me. "This whole town is out to get rid of me. They've been brainwashed by that Constable Owens, and now it's only a matter of time before I'm forced to leave."

This was almost too much, but if I didn't play along I wouldn't be

getting any money. "I see. What has Constable Owens done to you?" "What has he done to me? The man has endangered the natural balance which allows me to put bread on my table! Do you have any idea what the presence of his bloody steam engine does to my magickal abilities?"

Ah, there it was. He was struggling with the very thing that I was struggling with just by entering his shop... but while his magicks merely made me uneasy the presence of truly modern technology could indeed run him out of town as he feared. He was a bit self-centered, perhaps, but his complaint wasn't without merit. "I see. You're speaking of the nature of magick and technology..."

"Of course I am," he grumbled. "And that Constable Owens is weakening my powers. There was a time that I was the most powerful man in all of Shrouded Hills!"

I couldn't help but let out a laugh the moment he said it. I tried to cover my mirth with an exclamation, "Goodness! A big place like this!" There's self-centered and then there's ridiculous. This man was the latter.

The sarcasm is lost on him.

"Yes! If only there was someone to do something about it..."

He throws a hooded glance my way.

I didn't like it, but at least it would be a job. "What exactly are you proposing?"

His voice lowered to a barely audible hush, "If you could find a way to disable that infernal machine, I might be able to part with a couple of healing potions. What do you say?"

Damn it all! Does nobody pay gold in this town?! At least I could sell the damned potions if Virgil couldn't make use of them during our travels. I had to take what I could get and it's not like I cared what happened to the steam engine. It might even be fun to take apart if I had the chance. "It's a deal."

He nodded, "Return when it's done."

I sighed, the contempt heavy in my voice, "Very well. Good day, sir."

The morning fog was clearing up underneath the afternoon sun when I exited the shop. In the distance I could see a great big rock that I could only assume was the famed 'Bessie Toone'. I wandered in that direction. On the way I encountered a particularly spacious house situated not too far from the mine. It looked to be an excellent target for a good plundering. I tried the door and it was unlocked. *Perfect.*

"Yes? What is it, ma'am?"

Not only was somebody home, but there were two somebodies... and one of them was a half ogre! This wasn't such a good place to plunder after all. *He does look like he has money, though...* "What is your name, sir?"

Suddenly the man began to look very nervous and sweat formed on his brow. "I... I am Percival Toone. Why do you ask?" he stammered.

Good god, man... you're the one with the half ogre guard and you're afraid of a woman? "Why are you so nervous?"

"What? Uh... uh, I..."

He visibly deflates.

"I thought you were here to kill me... business men I was forced to sell the mine to are rather unscrupulous. They are very upset about the ore in the mine going sour."

He wrings his hands in despair.

"I need to find a way to free my mother. It's her ghost that is ruining the ore somehow."

He looks at me with a pleading gaze.

I gave him a sideways glance. Something didn't feel right here, but I already agreed to destroy a steam engine and whatever he was about to ask couldn't be any worse. "Your mother's ghost?"

He shakes his head sadly.

"My poor mother... she killed herself, you see. When the silver dried up, we were forced to sell the mine. She went around the bend soon after. Went up to the mine, she did, fired all the workers and did herself in."

"Perhaps I can help free your mother's ghost." *Why do I never think before I speak? I know I'm desperate for money, but just what the hell am I offering to do? I don't know the first thing about ghosts.*

"...that would be wonderful!"

He claps his hands together.

"If you could do that, I would be ever so grateful. It could mean a

monetary reward of coins as well."

500 coins! Now we're talking! "I will return when I have looked into this matter." I didn't know how in the bloody hell I was going to get rid of a ghost, but for 500 coins it was damn well worth a shot.

Bessie Toone, here I come...

Chapter the Sixth: Making Good On One's Promises

The Bessie Toone mine was a dark and dirty place, though I really shouldn't have expected otherwise. It was difficult to see inside, but there were several lanterns on the sides that Virgil was kind enough to light as we went along. The smell of wet fur permeated the mine, overpowering the now faint scent of metal and machinery. It would have been a marvelous thing to see back when the mine was still being worked, when Shrouded Hills prospered instead of decayed.

A scrawny wolf with a damp coat crept around the corner, prowling with its body low to the ground. It looked up at me and bared its teeth, emitting a deep growl that slowly grew in strength. It lunged at me, but for a wolf it was actually quite slow. It didn't really seem to be in the best of health, though I didn't imagine most wolves could survive so well living in an old mine so near to a town. It saddened me, but I put the wolf out of its misery.

There were more than just sick wolves in the mine, however. As I progressed deeper inside the mine I encountered several aggressive, overgrown rats. *More rats. I hate rats. What is it with rats around here?* Although they didn't pose much of a threat individually, in a group they were a bit more dangerous. Luckily the tips I got from the guard were paying off nicely and I found myself fumbling quite a bit less than I did the last time I had to fend off rodents.

In the deepest part of the mine even the filthy rats gave way to vermin of a much worst sort: spiders. My hatred for rats was no small secret, but even that paled in comparison to the panicked revulsion that welled up in the pit of my stomach when I saw three spiders the size of my fist crawling out of a dark corner and towards me. I did not let out a shriek, I refused to, but it did take me several moments to regain my composure long enough to get a proper hold on my

dagger. When the spiders neared me I gave them a stabbing the likes of which they'll never forget. Well, they probably forgot it the second the blade cleaved through whichever bit they use for a brain, but that's beside the point. Spiders were a lot less fearsome when out in the open and big enough to stab.

Before me stands an ethereal figure, with a ghastly look in her eyes. "Sarah, my dear Sarah..."

By far the most horrible thing in that mine was the ghost of old Bessie Toone herself. More than just goosebumps, that woman gave me chills. Her voice echoed hauntingly throughout the mine, "Sarah, my dear Sarah..." Over and over again she repeated the name.

Sarah... I tried calling out to her, asking her why she was still there, but she only ever said the same thing in response.

Rumor has it that one day she walked up to the mine, fired all of the workers, and disappeared into the caves. I shuddered uncontrollably. Her spirit was stuck there, forever wandering the barren, rock passageways... calling out the name 'Sarah', her words echoing interminably. I focused on accomplishing what I could quickly so I could take leave of the awful place.

I saw a boot with a tag labeled 'TOONE' sitting on a nearby table so I snatched it up quickly. *This ought to please that damned fop.* I wasn't quite done with the mine yet, however, as I had made other promises. Searching thoroughly revealed a stick of dynamite, likely intended to be used for any number of tasks in the mine. *Well, the mine's shut on account of haunting anyway. They won't care if I borrow this.* Although taking apart the town's steam engine sounded like a rather interesting exercise, I supposed I stood a much lower chance of getting caught if I were to simply blow it to smithereens.

I fought my way through more and more vermin, exploring several side passages of the mine. Eventually my luck changed for the better and I found the last thing I was looking for: a shining lump of ore, its color a stark contrast from the dark and dirty heaps of rock piled high in the mine carts. I picked up a nearby pickaxe and aimed at the rock carefully, using the same precision that I might use to stab a man in the back. My aim was true and my hands were steady, loosening the rock in a few quick blows. I picked up the fallen bit of ore and stuffed it in my purse. *This looks like it'll make me a fine*

dagger, Mr. Gurloes. I certainly wasn't lingering in the mine because I enjoyed its atmosphere, so once I had everything I'd come for I left it immediately. All I had to do to make my way out was follow the trail of dead vermin.

My first stop on the way out was the place nearest to the mine: Percy Toone's house. His mother was obsessed with this 'Sarah' and I found it hard to believe he didn't think to mention it earlier. I was angry that he'd hidden something from me and he was cowardly enough that I felt I could get my way by expressing that anger. He glared at me suspiciously when I entered, noticing the harsh look on my face. "We meet again," his voice was unsteady when he spoke, betraying the veiled confidence he tried to put forth in his words.

"I 'spoke' with your mother's ghost." Percy's face went white.

"Yours. What did she say?"

That's right, you knew all along what she was saying in that mine... how could you not? You were hoping I'd be turned away by the vermin. "She said, 'Sarah, my dear Sarah. Sarah, come back, please. Oh, Sarah. Sarah Sarah Sarah.' Just who the hell is Sarah?"

He looks disgusted.

"Sarah."

He spits the name.

"Sarah. That is my sister. A hateful person, really. She deserted us... left here to go to that dilapidated kingdom, Dernholm! What an affront to our family!"

Percy was overreacting. His anger was hollow and obviously false. *Perhaps your simple minded ruses pass for deception in this town, but I see right through you.* "Why did she do that?" I certainly wasn't going to let up on him that easily.

Unfortunately for me, he seemed to decide he'd rather not have my help after all. There couldn't have been more than the smallest grain of truth amidst the lies that began spilling forth from his mouth.

"Who can say? She was always so irritable and unkind to me. It broke my mother's heart when she left."

I'm sure it did, Percy. I can always count on you to tell it like it is.

"Perhaps if I could go and speak with her..." Talking with Percy was getting me nowhere fast and that didn't seem likely to change

anytime soon. It seemed as though Sarah was my only option.

Percy was, of course, indignant. "Why? Why would you want to do that? She can be of no help, of that I can assure you. It would be unwise... I mean there's nothing she can tell you that would help."

Nothing that would help you, you mean. Nothing that would be a blatant lie to cover up your own inadequacies. "It can't hurt, though, and I do need something to go on..."

"No! I, uh, mean, I don't rightly know if she is still, uh, living in Dernholm. Actually, now that I think about it, I believe she no longer lives there... I suppose you'll have to find answers elsewhere..."

You are a horrible liar, Percival Toone. "I am sorry I mentioned it. I will be going, now." It looked like he'd all but confirmed that his sister was, in fact, still living in Dernholm. She couldn't be hard to find in such a place since there weren't many who still remained there in recent years. I was going to head in that direction anyway, so I made a note to track her down.

I left Percy's house and wandered around town for awhile, just trying to kill a bit of time before sundown. I didn't want to hold onto live dynamite any longer than I had to, but I also didn't want to blow up a town treasure in broad daylight. In my wanderings I helped myself to a few meager belongings that were poorly concealed behind a locked door and I also stumbled upon another tiny little magick shop. For a backwater town with a mine and a steam engine Shrouded Hills sure did have a lot of magicians.

The proprietress was a young looking elven woman, though with elven lineage who can really tell how old the buggers are. She greeted me politely as I entered her shop, but my skin was already beginning to itch just a little bit. *Well, I'm already doing odd jobs for everybody else in this damned town, I might as well work for you, too.* "I am looking for work. Do you require assistance with anything?"

She thought about it for a second then responded, "This town is small and my needs are few. There is nothing I need an outsider to do for me." Then another thought seemed to cross her mind and she glanced at me a bit harder. "You appear a traveler. Tell me, do you wander far?"

The answer to that question was easy. "Yes."

"Well, then. If, in your wanderings, you happen to come across an elven amulet engraved with the name "N'Tala" upon its face, I would ask that you return it to me. It is an old family heirloom, stolen a generation ago."

Indeed. Everybody wants something, don't they? "Where do you think it may be?"

She chuckled a bit and shrugged. "I have not the slightest inkling of its whereabouts. I cannot fathom why I have even told you of it. Perhaps these many years have confused my mind. Well, no matter. IF you do happen upon it, I would reward you handsomely."

Only one of us was amused by this. *What in the gods would cause you to ask me to fetch an amulet when you've bloody clue where it is, if it even still exists?! Damned elves!* "I will keep an eye out for it, Madam." I was better at lying than Percy. "Good day."

As I headed away from the shop I was very nearly accosted by a gnome who seemed desperate to talk with me.

"Excuse me, but I couldn't help but notice that you're new here in town. We've heard about the IFS Zephyr... were you on the blimp when it crashed?"

If ever there were a funny question to ask, that is the one. Why not ask if I'd been to the crash site, if I knew anything about the crash...? No, you have to ask me if I bloody survived it. You must think me a fool. "Mind your own business, sir."

"Please, madam! I must know! Were you on that blimp or not? I have very good reason for wanting to know! I beseech you..."

This gnome is far too persistent. He may be acting polite, but I always act polite when I'm trying to rob, manipulate, or otherwise abuse the good-natured trust of my fellow man (or woman, I don't discriminate). "And I told you that I'd rather not speak of it. Good day..."

He seemed flustered. "Madam, you don't understand! I am Mr. Radcliffe and my brother Preston was on that zeppelin! If you can give me any information about him...!"

The image of the two corpses in the inn room flashed across my

mind. I could still see the words on Joachim's note: *Do not speak with anyone about the zeppelin crash*. Whatever Joachim is or is not he certainly gave good advice with that one. If the gnome was indeed telling the truth then I was being horribly rude, but the chances of his being honest were far lower than my chances of winning the Tarantian lottery. "My apologies, Mr. Radcliffe, but I cannot help you with this matter."

His tone changed as he suddenly became aware that I wasn't as dull as he thought. He sounded downright menacing and he cast me a hateful glare, "Hmmp! No need to be rude, madam. I suppose you'll be staying here in Shrouded Hills. I'm sure we'll be seeing one another again..." *I'll take that as a threat, 'Mr. Radcliffe'.*

"Good day to you." I politely excused myself and began forming plans to get the hell out of Shrouded Hills as quickly as possible. It surprised me that Virgil hadn't warned me to be careful in hushed whispers. Either he was beginning to trust me or perhaps he was really that upset when I didn't let him talk with the last suspicious man we met. I wasn't really sure what he was thinking, but I certainly wasn't going to get any better at lying if I sat back and let him do all the talking. Still, I felt guilty all over again. It seemed like I wasn't any better of a person in my new life than I'd been in my last.

Evening began to fall and darkness sheltered me like a warm blanket, concealing my unscrupulous activities from prying eyes. I inconspicuously wandered on over to the large building I passed on my way into town the previous night and approached the door cautiously. The distinct rattle of a steam engine issued forth from inside and I knew I had the right place. Quietly I cracked open the door and slipped inside. Virgil followed soon after.

As luck would have it there were rats on the inside. *Why does it always have to be rats? Why can't I ever encounter bunnies? Bunnies are cute and harmless.* Thinking such things didn't help me in the slightest. Fond memories of the old rabbit farm in Caladon bubbled to the surface of my mind and I suddenly began longing for many of the luxuries I'd left behind. I remembered the kind old farmer that let the dirty little orphan girl play with his rabbits. Many years later I strolled down Old King's Way, hanging on Frederick's arm, and we

stopped to feed those same bunnies. *That was another life. I am not that person. I'm a thief, soon to be a demolitionist.* Unfortunately for my new persona, the object I was trying to destroy was guarded by a peculiar dwarf.

"You like my steam engine? It's mine. I keep it clean. It runs good." Perhaps 'guarded' wasn't exactly an appropriate term. The strange little dwarf next to the engine looked at me with glazed-over eyes that suggested he'd been inhaling a few too many fumes for his own good. When he spoke his voice was cracked and uneven. It occurred to me that if I just waited long enough he would pass out of his own accord. I didn't really have the time, though. Perhaps I could convince him to leave for awhile. He certainly wouldn't be smart enough to catch on. "Uh, yes, I see. Very... pretty?" *How else am I supposed to respond to that?*

"Yes! Yes! It's shiny! See? I like steam. Steam is hot. It makes a funny noise."

Catching on to my ruse wasn't a problem, but being too stupid to hold a normal conversation was proving to be problematic. "And you say you take care of this thing?"

"I'm good with machine. I fix good. You like my steam engine? It's shiny!"

This was going nowhere fast. Although dynamite wasn't exactly my specialty, the steam engine was rather large. I looked around and noted several places it could be laid that would be detrimental to the steam engine but wouldn't harm the dwarf overly much. I certainly wasn't going to kill him. I'd sooner tell Mr. Dunne just where he could stuff those potions he offered me in payment. "I see. Well, it has been intellectually stimulating, but I must go." The irony was lost on him.

He shouted as I made my way out of the room, "Shiny shiny engine! I see my face!" *It can't be a good idea to leave that poor thing trapped in here with the engine. It'll only make him worse.* In my mind I was actually doing the dwarf a favor by destroying the steam engine.

Once the dwarf's attention was shifted back to his 'shiny' I signalled to Virgil to wait for just a moment. Very carefully I crept into the room and dialed the timer on the dynamite until I was satisfied. I laid it down on the other side of the engine from the dwarf and hoped he'd survive the experience. *Sorry, friend, but I'm being paid to get rid of your shiny. Try not to get hurt.*

I didn't really have any experience with explosives, but it worked well enough. The dwarf had a few scratches from where bits of metal went flying past him, but was otherwise alright. Confused as a baby in a brothel, but he'd live. I hastily made my escape and Virgil followed.

Mr. Dunne's shop was on exactly the opposite end of town and at the moment that's just where I wanted to be. I hurried away from the explosion as quickly as I could while not being overly loud about the matter. Slipping inside quietly, I whispered to Mr. Dunne, "I've taken care of your steam engine problem..."

"Really? That's wonderful! Here's your payment..."

He hands me some potions.

"You're quite a resourceful young woman... perhaps you'd like to do something else for me?"

Perhaps this job will involve getting more money and harming fewer dwarves. "Of course... I'm at your service..." Then Mr. Dunne launched into some hullabaloo about alchemical gold that I couldn't care less about. Something or other about needing a special ingredient that he couldn't disclose to me before he could perform the transmutation. I was certain that if modern magick truly discovered a way to turn lead into gold the discovery wouldn't be made by a self-centered gnome in Shrouded Hills. Whether that gnome was willing to pay for the possibility, however, was of much more importance to me.

"...the only man who sells it is in Dernholm, to the east. The man's name is Charles Dolan, and he owns a shop in Dernholm." *That's the part I needed to hear.*

Since I'd been planning on stopping in Dernholm anyway a few extra coin would do me some good. "Could you mark it on my map, good sir?" I held my map out to him. *Just show me where Sarah lives... goooood gnome.*

"Certainly, madam," he replied as he made a small 'X' where Dernholm is located.

"You just need to speak with Mr. Dolan and tell him that you've come to pick up a package for Jongle Dunne. I'll wire ahead to him and tell him to expect you. For your services, I'll pay you gold pieces. What

do you say?"

Cheap bastard, aren't you? There wasn't much of a choice to be made. An extra 70 coins on top of the 500 I was hoping to earn by chatting with Sarah was better than turning down the 70 coins. It was practically free money. "Sounds good. I'll do it."

Mr. Dunne grinned widely, "Many thanks, madam. I shall await your return." *I don't know what you really think you'll be gaining by doing all of this, but at least I can take your money.*

My next order of business was to deliver the ore that Mr. Gurloes had asked for. A new weapon could always come in handy and I wanted to be sure it would be ready before I left for Dernholm, which would hopefully be incredibly soon. "Good day, Mr. Gurloes. I've brought back your ore... here you go..."

"That's grand! I really appreciate it. Come back here in a little while, I'll have your dagger..."

"I'll do that Lloyd..." It wouldn't do to start traveling at night anyway and I figured I wouldn't be caught for blowing up the steam engine at least until morning so I went back to the inn to rent another room. After I paid the innkeeper for another night the half orc sitting at the bar coughed suspiciously, giving me a purposeful stare. I wondered just what it was that he wanted. Sitting down next to him I casually asked, "Who might you be?"

"I be Jacob Bens. And I don't usually waste many words on outlanders, but you look like a woman I might be having need of..."

I didn't really like Jacob's tone, but I did need money quite badly. I listened on, hoping he wasn't going to ask for anything crude.

"Hmmm. Perhaps. Speak quickly..."

He winked, which set an uneasy feeling upon me. It looked like things were going exactly where I feared they were going. "I like a woman who hears opportunity when it comes a'knockin. Here's the word, and make sure to keep it to yourself..."

"Just keep your hands to yourself and tell me..." *If you're going to ask me for... no, no, no... that hasn't been for sale for a very long time... and certainly never to those with orcish blood. Ugh.*

He leaned in closely, "I'll make this short. Do you fancy yourself the

thieving type, woman?"

I was honestly so relieved at his asking that I almost laughed. This was quickly turning from a job that made me feel unpleasant to a job that sounded like it could be a whole lot of fun. "I'm a woman who knows her way around a lock..." I replied.

He smiles, looking to and fro, some ale dribbling from his chin.

"I thought I was right about you. Listen... I'm no thief, but I've got some information to help us both get rich..."

"I'm listening..." *You may be clueless when it comes to picking locks, but you're still a thief in spirit, my good man.* This sounded like it would be good practice AND I would get paid for it. I'd spent so much time looking for good work in that damned town and all I had to do was look right at the inn where I was staying. Well, it sounded like it would involve breaking the law, too, but that never really stopped me. Didn't even slow me down.

"There's a bank here in town, and j'es yesterday the payroll for the Bessie Toone mine was deposited there for safekeeping. There's at least 500 gold pieces in that safe, as we speak." The half orc pulled a slip of paper out of his pocket and thumbed it greedily. "This here's the combination to the bank's safe. Do I make m'self clear, woman?"

I grinned wickedly. "Crystal, my good man. What's the catch?" As long as the catch didn't involve 500 gold as payment for a certain other service I had a feeling things were going to work out just fine.

"Here's what's gonna happen... we split the take right down the middle. And word has it that the Bowen Gang is gonna rob the bank any day now, so you better go do it as soon as possible. And if I find out you're trying to skip town, I'll get the old doctor after you..."

Doctor? Why the bloody hell would he send a doctor after me for robbing a bank? "Who's the doctor?"

"The doctor? Old Doc Roberts is the only real law this here town got... god knows Constable Owens' lilly-livered hide ain't goin' to do nuthin' about nuthin'. If a man needs somethin' done in this town law-way, then they go to Doc Roberts, and if he feels like it, then it gets done. I'm sure he's got money in that bank, so he'd be real interested if someone was gonna steal it..."

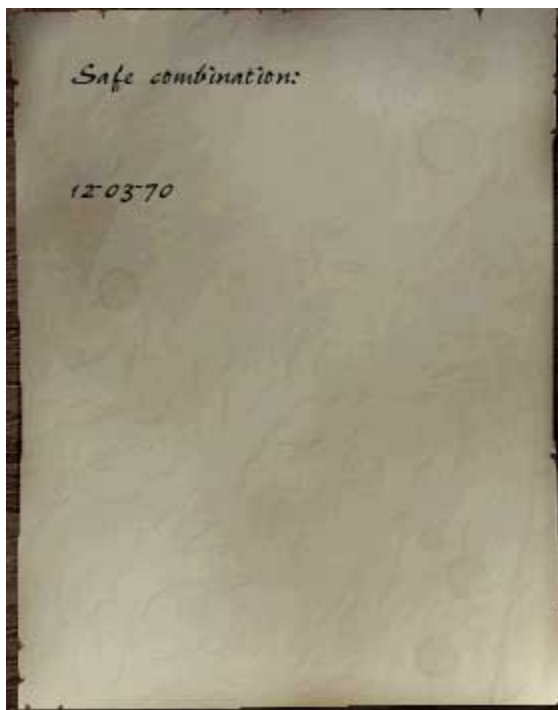
The half orc's meaning was clearer now. "I see. I think we might have a deal here, Jacob."

"Alright, I'll give you the combination to the safe. You break into the bank and steal that payroll. Then you meet me here before noon on the following day and you give me my gold. If I don't see your face back here, then I go straight to Roberts and tell him who stole his money..."

The half orc and I shook hands on it, "Deal." *This'll be the fastest, easiest 250 coins I ever made. I should've started robbing banks years ago.*

"Good, good," the half orc handed me the slip of paper. "I'll be here, waiting, until noon after the day you do th' job. Don't double cross me, woman..."

Misogynist bastard. "Until later, Jacob." I'd show him how a proper heist was done. They wouldn't know the money was gone 'till they counted it the next day.



When this is done, I'm going to have to get the bloody hell out of here...

and fast. He'll drink his share of the money away in less than a week, and then he'll be running to Doc Roberts hoping to get the rest of the money all to himself. Not gonna happen, Jacob... not on my watch. It's a good thing I was already planning on leaving anyway. My popularity in Shrouded Hills was sinking fast.

Chapter the Seventh: One Must Never Dawdle About A Crime Scene

I killed a few more hours in the main room of the inn, chatting with Jacob and the half ogre fellow named Sogg. The conversation wasn't exactly stimulating, to say the least, but at least they weren't the type of people to judge me. I ordered a shot of whiskey and enjoyed it thoroughly. *It's been far too long since I've had a good, strong drink.* Once I'd started I naturally wanted even more, but I had to hold myself back. If I got too drunk there would be absolutely no chance of stealing the bank payroll. 250 coins could buy a rather pleasantly large amount of whiskey.

I gave it just another couple of hours for the alcohol to wear off before making my move. Darkness had entirely consumed the small town and fog began rolling in from the mountains. I politely excused myself from the bar to get some fresh air outside. Virgil followed, of course, though I insisted that he get some rest. "I can handle this on my own Virgil," I pleaded.

His voice was firm, "Pardon, madam, but you never know when those assassins will strike next." I sighed, mostly because he was right. *What makes you care so much anyway? I've been nothing but rude to you.*

There were a few guards still patrolling the streets despite the late hour, but that was to be expected. Even a small town like this can't go completely unguarded at night. This was nothing compared to the brightly lit streets of Caladon, however. They'd never see me under the cover of darkness, and they'd never hear me over the sound of their own footsteps. The lock to the bank's front door clicked open under my gentle guidance and I slipped inside.

I had to stifle a laugh when I noticed what passed for bank security in Shrouded Hills. There was only a single guard in the entire bank and instead of guarding the vault he was around the corner from it, sitting almost directly under the lantern. *How can you be so stupid? I can see you clear as day and you've got to squint through the darkness to see anything. Bloody backwater town.*

As I suspected, the guard couldn't see a thing and I slipped around the countertop, approaching the door to the vault. It popped open just as easily as the last and I slipped into the vault in mere seconds. There was no need to look at the note, I had already memorized the numbers on it. I nimbly dialed in the combination and the door to the safe swung open with a gentle creak.

The guard was so lax there wasn't even any need to hurry. Taking my time, I counted out the 500 gold pieces Jacob was expecting. He was right, too. *When a bloody drunken half orc knows the exact amount and the safe combination you've got one hell of a security problem.* I slipped out just as easily as I had gotten in, with nobody the wiser. Jacob was waiting across the street just outside of the light cast by the nearby lantern.

I walked boldly over to him, not concealing our affiliation in the slightest. *If you dare rat on me, you're going down with me.* "I've returned with your money, Jacob... here, take it..."

"Yes, well done, stranger. I heard you'd pulled that one off nicely. Thank you."

He burps.

"Been nice doing business with ya."

"Good day, Jacob..." *Time to get the hell out of here. When he drinks that away he'll be blabbering to Doc Roberts in no time.* I retired for the evening, planning to wrap up what little business I had left in the morning before heading out. I indulged myself by taking the opportunity to have another warm bath. It would probably be my last for some time since the train didn't run to a bloody little country town like Shrouded Hills. When I left it was going to be a very long walk.

First thing in the morning I paid a visit to the blacksmith, hoping he'd had the time to finish my blade. The dagger I'd been using was full of

nicks and dents from all the clumsy fumbling I'd done. Why, one time I even stabbed it straight into a rock. It was in horrible condition and a new dagger sounded mighty fine. "Good morning, Mr. Gurloes. How is my dagger coming along?"

"It's finished. Here you go, and thank you once again for your help..."

"It was no trouble at all. Many thanks for this fine blade, good sir.

Farewell!" *Yes, this will be delightful for stabbing with.* Next I visited the damned fop. I didn't want to, but I wanted even less to hang onto the crusty old boot I'd picked up for him. "Good morning, Ristezze," I said his name with the same bizzarre flair that he always does, but he didn't seem to notice. As I spoke I tossed him his filthy prize. He looked it over for a moment, quickly realizing what it was.

"Wonderful! Ristezze shall tell you what you want to know then. P. Schuyler & Sons is a well-respected jeweler in Tarant. A strange family, but they ALWAYS do good business. And here... Ristezze shall mark Tarant on your map as well. Their address in the city is Devonshire Way. Good luck, my friend."

Tarant again, eh? That ought to make Virgil happy. "Thank you, Ristezze. Good day to you..." I was secretly elated that I'd never have to set foot in that dandy bastard's shop again. Since I didn't suspect I'd be finding an heirloom elven amulet anytime soon, my business in Shrouded Hills was finally concluded. I hurriedly rushed towards the far edge of town, planning to cross the nearby river and make my escape. On my way, however, an older gentleman grabbed me roughly by the arm. *How DARE you!* He was lucky I didn't stab him out of reflex. It looked like Virgil wanted to give him a good thumping as well.

He looks at me with true malice in his eyes.

"Hervor told me what you did! If I had a competent witness, I'd throw you in jail right now for destroying our steam engine. Lucky for you Hervor is not competent. I suggest you leave me be, dog, before I find a reason to arrest you."

You're the one that stuck the poor dwarf in that engine room in the first place. You've nobody to blame but yourself for the steam engine getting destroyed. Yes, that's it. It was no matter, I was on my way out of town anyway. "If that is how you feel, then I will be on my way." To be frank, my encounter with the man was relieving. Not only did I learn that I couldn't be arrested for demolishing the steam engine, but I also found out just how incompetent the constable really was. Doc Roberts might be a different story, it was true, but it seemed it was

far harder to get caught here than it was in Caladon. Even in Caladon I was only ever caught once.

As I approached the bridge out of town I noticed three figures standing in front of the gate... a human and two half ogres. The half ogres stared at me with the same uncomprehending, dumb look that they all did. They were crude things, barely knowing more than how to hit things 'real good'. The man, though, he was definitely a strange one to be making acquaintances with half ogres. "Excuse me. And who are you, sir?"

"Who am I? I am Lukan! Lukan the Witless! Where I roam, the masses squabble in pertubisiveness and otrepidunction! You dare pretend not to recognize me?"

That's it. I'm going to stab myself in the ears until I can't hear you anymore. "Witless. Quite apropos, I'd have to say..."

"Yes, don't you think? My two vehementuous companions gave it to me. Witless, you see! Without humor! Without laughs! My irascibanalinity is unmatched!"

I could never pass by such a wonderful opportunity to insult somebody to their face. "Yes. You truly are without wits, Lukan."

"Thank you so much. I can almost forgive your churfinitly with comments like that."

"You know, there's something about your vocabularity... Good god! Now I'M doing it..." *Damn it all. The bastard rubs off on people.* Virgil was chuckling quietly. I gave him an icy stare but he only laughed harder.

"It's not uncommon that my eloquentology rubs off on those around me... oralization like my own is almost preterlateral in its uniqueness..."

"Uh... please, I can't take it anymore." Growing up on the streets as I did made it impossible to be considered well-bred, but I could at least speak properly. I suspected that if it weren't for his two half ogre friends this Lukan fellow would've been knocked silly more than a few times by now. That probably wouldn't have helped his vocabulary, really.

"Do you question the validation of my verbosity?"

I've had enough! Just... stop... talking! "Never, never. About crossing this bridge..."

"Ah yes, the bridge... that's a different matter. You see, my friends and I have found it advantageous to require of travelers a small toll for the use of our bridge... you can be assured the funds are beneficial

to our little group here..."

I stole this money fair and square, you can learn to do the same.

"Hmmm. I may be able to persuade you otherwise..."

"I seriously doubt it, my friend."

He glanced backward at his half ogre companions purposefully, then crossed his arms and looked back at me. "I seriously doubt it, my friend."

His stupidity knows no bounds. I make an ambiguous statement like that and he doesn't even notice. I didn't want to tangle with half ogres if I didn't have to. Maybe I'd be lucky and he would only ask a pittance. He probably couldn't squeeze any more than a few gold from the poor sods in this town anyway. "I guess not. Maybe I'll just pay the fee. How much is it?"

"A microcosmical amount... a mere 1000 gold pieces! Nothing for a well-traveled individual like yourself!"

Well I never...! He did notice the ambiguity of my statement! That does it. He can stuff his damned fee. "All right. I'll return when I have the funds."

I turned back towards town just far enough to get out of view then snuck back to the bridge along the river bank. I was so close to the ogres that I could practically feel their warm breath upon my back as I slipped my pick into the gate. It slipped open easily and the gate opened with a disastrously loud creak.

"Get away from there!"

In an instant the fight was on. Thinking quickly, I reached into my purse and pulled out a grenade I'd scrounged up from somewhere. I seem to wind up with the strangest things sometimes and I don't even really know where I got them. They probably belonged to somebody else, but at least I was making use of them. I lit the fuse on the grenade and dropped it to the ground unceremoniously, diving headfirst towards the riverbank to avoid the imminent explosion.

The half ogres gasped in pain and surprise, turning to run away on charred, burnt legs. It was awfully silly of them to turn their backs to me. Half ogres or not, their kidneys are still located in roughly the same spot. *They DID attack me first, and it never would've happened if*

they hadn't demanded such a ridiculous fee in the first place... and if they hadn't insulted me! 'Well-traveled' indeed!

I saved dear old Lukan for last, hurling myself at him as the last half ogre fell to the ground. I was furious, and the excitement of combat forced adrenaline throughout my body. My heart beat loudly in my chest, yet despite it all I felt nothing aside from pity - for Lukan and for myself. Killing should only ever be a last resort and it was pathetic how often I had to resort to it. I said a brief prayer for the poor sod and, with a deep sigh, pushed the gate open the rest of the way. Finally, it was time to make my way out of town.

"Hello... I thought we'd run into each other out here..."

Damnation! Can't I just leave this bloody town already?! How many people are going to make me stab them?! "Ah, Mr. Radcliffe. What is it you need?" Externally my demeanor was calm and polite, as usual.

"You remember me? Ah, good. Listen... I've been to the crash site. I know you have something of Preston's... a ring. Please... I'd really appreciate it if you'd give it to me..."

"I recommend you get the hell out of my way, sir." The time for being polite had now passed. The gnome's voice was sinister and threatening, and his hand clutched something tightly in his coat pocket.

"Don't threaten me, stranger. Hand it over, or you're dead..."

One of us will certainly wind up dead, gnome. Are you really so confident it'll be me? I was uncomfortable with how things were happening. If the conversation continued at its current pace I would be in yet another fight for my life, the outcome of which involved either dying or killing yet again. My options were few and I hoped to try and talk my way out of it. *Practice, practice, practice... one of these days it'll pay off.* "Sorry, I no longer have it." *Damnation! I just admitted to having it in the first place!*

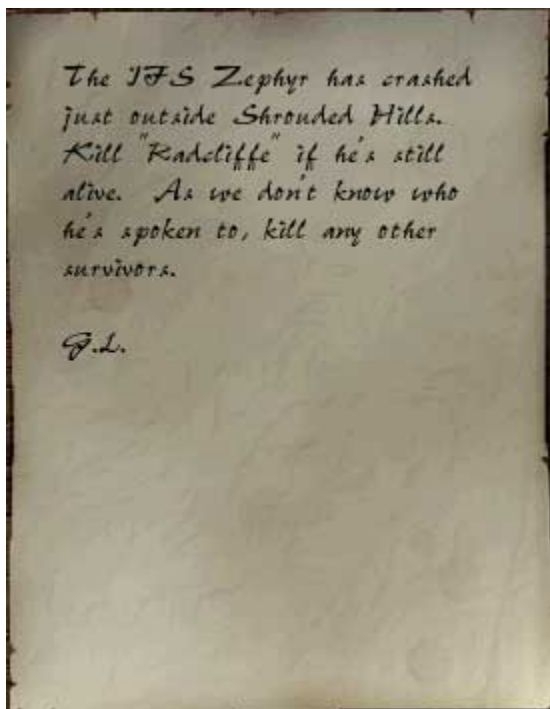
"That's truly a shame, madam. I'm afraid that it's entirely unacceptable..."

I chuckled nervously, "Well, there's nothing to be done. I really must be going... it was a pleasure speaking with you, though."

"You're not leaving Shrouded Hills alive!"

The gnome lunged at me with a blade of his own, but mine was out faster than he could blink and I deflected his blow expertly. I was already on the move, preparing for him to strike again. I let him dash past me as he missed another strike and my dagger found purchase in

a very vital spot on his back. *It's practically a reflex. Though shameful, I suppose even a past like mine has its uses.* The gnome's body fell to the ground, unmoving. I kicked his dagger away from his hand and began searching through his pockets for valuables. *I know it doesn't excuse my behavior, but I really tried to avoid killing you.* All I found was a rather suspicious note which I, of course, read immediately.



Well that bloody does it. I'm getting the hell out of here and the farther I go the better.



I already had the location of Dernholm marked on my map so I headed in that direction. It was far enough from Shrouded Hills that I

suspected the assassins would have difficulty tracking me down there. At least that was what I hoped. In truth I had no idea how many of them there were, nor how widespread. I didn't even know why they wanted to kill me so badly, but all of this only confirmed my suspicions that Preston Radcliffe was no practical joker.

Chapter the Eighth: The Town That Rejected Our Modern World

I could smell Dernholm nearly a day before Virgil and I actually arrived in it. I'd read about it once and I'd heard the stories. My expectations were decidedly low. Nothing could've prepared me for the reality, however. The town was desolate. The stench of decay hung about thickly in the air. *So this is how a town dies.*

At one point it had been the capital of a kingdom and a prosperous town, but now it had sunk even lower than Shrouded Hills. It was dirty, run-down, and half abandoned. If there weren't money to be made I would've turned around and left immediately. Even the road was cleaner, and probably safer, too.

The first thing that caught my eye was a worn old paper lying on the ground next to a rubbish bin. It looked as though somebody had intended to throw it away at least a week prior, missed, and nobody bothered to clean it up afterwards. I looked at it, curious, since I knew there couldn't be any printing presses in Cumbria.

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COUNCILMAN URGES WAR ON CALADON!

THEY MUST BE STOPPED BEFORE THEY DESTROY OUR WAY OF LIFE

In an impassioned, and at times violent display on the floor of the Industrial Council, Councilman Braithe called for nothing less than the unconditional surrender of Caladon, even though no formal declaration of war

has been issued.

"Were the magically inclined in Tarant ever to try to usurp power as in the bloody mage riots of ten years past, Caladon would throw full support behind them," he screamed. "A monarchy can not be trusted, much less one that embraces both magick and technology! I say, annex Caladon now!"

This reporter could not agree more with the sentiments of Councilman Braithe. It is high time we

gave those Caladonians what for! We at the Tarantian hope that you will join us in urging a recall of present chairman Willoughbsby and establishing Braithe in his place.

WEATHER

The Meteorological Service Bureau of Tarant is Predicting sunny weather for the next Two to Three days, with an increasing Chance of Precipitation before the Passage of a Fortnight.

TAX INCREASE

The Parliament is again considering Raising the Levy of Incomes in Tarant by another 2 coins for every 100 earned. The Speaker has refuted all Public Criticism of the Increase, by Citing the importance of Public Works projects currently under way.

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

There will be a City Council meeting this Friday which is Open to the Public. The Meeting will commence sharply at 7pm.

EDITORIAL REMINDER

Hogwash. Caladonians don't care one whit what goes on in Tarant, nor does King Farad. It's Tarantians that would support a technological revolution in Caladon, not the other way around. We embrace magick and technology equally. The paper partially infuriated me until I reminded myself that I could no longer properly consider myself a citizen of Caladon. Then my feelings drifted more towards sadness. A part of me missed Caladon, and I was also saddened at what the kind of

blatant misinformation that passed as news in Tarant.

The citizenry didn't know any better, they were largely comprised of factory workers and ne'er do wells. Not knowing any better, they'd support the ridiculous, biased ideals in the paper and that... would lead to this. *Just look at this place. They want to do this to Caladon just because magick hasn't been outlawed? Ludicrous.* I blamed the Gnomish Industrial Council.

Nevertheless, the more time I wasted pondering world politics the less time I spent earning money. Dolan's General Goods was just around the corner and I had a pickup to make. I wandered into the shop, a dirty old place with boarded up windows. Junk was lying about in heaps and the smell of grease and oil layed heavy on the air. Normally I would be comfortable in such a place, but in Dernholm it was somehow different. The trash available in the store wasn't the kind of mechanical parts and metal bits that one would usually find, instead it was well and truly trash. Discarded books, soiled clothing, and chunks of rotted wood. I wanted to get out as quickly as possible. "I'm here to pick up something for Jongle Dunne..."

"Ah. Old Jongle sent word that you'd be showing up, friend. I have his package right here."

He hands It to me

"That wizard Is just a crazy old man."

"Thank you. What sort of wares do you carry here?" I couldn't imagine there would be much demand for trash, but maybe things were different in Dernholm. I was hoping that if I stumbled upon the secret phrase he would turn around and show me a whole wall of daggers. Much to my disappointment he launched into a typical speech, the likes of which you could hear in nearly any shop in any small town from here all the way to Tarant.

"Just look around Madam... Our specialty here is reasonably priced wares, at excellent value. We stock common items, a little of everything you might need. Let me know if I can help you." I politely declined and turned around right back the way I came. I would be arriving in Tarant sooner or later, I had no need to scavenge through rotten Cumbrian junk. I'd much rather scavenge through the local rumor mill to see what work could be had before moving on to greener pastures. My expectations were quite low, however... and

with good reason.

I wandered on into the local bar: a likely place to gather hearsay, rumors, and outright lies. A friendly looking gentleman gave me a smile as I walked past. The dirt around the bottom of my dress and the fact that I hadn't bathed in well over a week made me fit right in. Perhaps I was even a cut above the rest. I sat down, "What do you know, friend?"

"Just having a drink. Hey .perhaps you're interested In a game of wits? I'll bet you 500 coins you dont know the answer to a question I have. What do you say?"

"Sure..." There was no hesitation in my acceptance whatsoever. *Who needs to rob banks when you can rob drunks? 500 coins for a bet?! This is the most legal crime I've ever committed.* The man sat up straight and looked me in the eye with confidence, sure he had me beat. He announced his question as though I would fold in defeat at the mere mention of it.

"Whats the name of the Train Stationin Tarant?"

Oh, please. You call that a question? Even if I didn't know it offhand, which I do, it's written on the note sitting in my pocket. I sighed, thinking about Wilhemina briefly once more and her man Jared, working...

"Vermillion Station." I could swear the man almost perked up when I answered correctly.

"Right! Nicely done! Here's your money!" *Good heavens, he even paid it! Willingly! What in blazes?!* I really hadn't expected him to actually fork over the cash. It was too good to be true.

"Th-thank you, kind sir." I stood up a bit dazed and wandered around to the other side of the bar. *I suppose all that time spent reading in Frederick's study had its uses after all.*

There was a woman sitting at a table alone, drinking a small glass of wine and wearing an old, dirty dress. I almost felt sorry for her.

"Heard anything interesting lately, madam?" *Care to make a bet, perhaps?*

"Oh, the usual bother...this and that. Oh! Did you hear about the IFS Zephyr crash? I dont know anything but just rumors, gossip...you know how the old women get. What have YOU heard?"

Oh hell. I hadn't thought about that topic coming up. I laughed nervously. "Ah, nothing I'm afraid. Can't say I've heard the slightest thing about that..."

She looked a bit disappointed, as though she'd just wasted the finest gossip on a complete and utter dullard. "Oh, I see. Well, I suppose one can't know everything. Good bye, madam..." She finished her wine and stood up to exit the bar. *It's nothing personal, I'm just tired of having people try to kill me.* I decided I'd had enough with muddying around. It was time to go to the grand font of rumors himself: the bartender.

"Hello bartender," I intoned casually. He looked up without a care in the world, barely even noticing me. *Good. That's the way I like it.*

"What can I do for you?" he said by rote, just another repetition of the same old routine he'd done a thousand times before.

I slapped a few coins on the counter, "A shot of whiskey and the latest rumors, please." It was as good an excuse as any to drink. Bartenders, unlike common folk, spill more information the more YOU drink.

He fetched a shot glass expertly from behind him and poured some caramel colored liquid into it from out of a nearby bottle. "So the adventurer woman wants to know the local rumors, eh?" He gave it some thought.

"Have you met Liarma Pel Dar, friend? wouldnt cross her, If were you. Her father trained her from birth to be skilled warrior."

"Pel Dar? Didn't a man by the name of Warren Pel Dar serve in the Dragon Cavalry during the war against Tarant? Could that be the father you're speaking of?"

The bartender's mouth nearly dropped open, his eyes wide with shock. "That's... that's quite impressive, madam. These days not many are so well acquainted with the history of this place. Do you know what happened to old Warren?"

Although the topic of conversation was quite grim, I was secretly

proud of myself for having retained so much of what I'd read. "That is not a difficult question, good sir. The Dragon Cavalry were, regrettably, completely wiped out. There is no doubt that Warren Pel Dar is among them."

He sighed deeply, as if shaking off an unpleasant memory, "You are correct once again, madam. It was a sad day, indeed. Tell me, how do you know of these things? It is obvious to any who live here that you are not from around these parts."

I shrugged, not really wanting to draw overly much attention to myself. "I've just read quite a lot of books. I believe what I know of this place stems from the title, 'The Fall of the Old Ways'. It was quite interesting to me at the time and I seem to have remembered much of it."

He nodded, "You've an excellent memory, madam. How about I try telling you something that you wouldn't have read in a book, eh?" I smiled at him and nodded, downing my shot of whiskey. He wiped a glass clean, setting it on the shelf behind him, then leaned in closer and whispered to me. "You didn't hear it from me, friend, but King Praetor wasn't the rightful heir to the throne. And I'll say no more about that..."

Now that was a juicy bit of gossip. He was right, that certainly wasn't the kind of thing that got written down in books and passed around. Sadly, it was gossip and nothing more. No money to be had in poking your nose in business like that. *This kingdom has seen better times, though... perhaps this Praetor could use a woman of my talents? Nobility always pays well.* "Of course, good sir. I think that was worth another whiskey. Have you heard anything else of interest?" He continued speaking as he fetched another glass and poured my second shot into it.

"I was wandering northwest of here, and I found an ancient maze, or at least the ruins of one I heard some strange noises and got out of there quick!"

Ugh. Well, I guess he does have me pegged as an adventurer. I made note of it, but didn't really have the time nor inclination to check it out. Curiosity prickled at the back of my mind, but I forced it down. *I will*

not explore something purely for the sake of getting myself killed. I started plotting out exactly what lied to the northwest, eliminating places where the maze couldn't possibly be. "I'll certainly think on it, my good man. Could you possibly tell me anything else that goes on around here?"

He gave it some thought, trying hard to accommodate the curious traveler that insisted in badgering him. "Have you met Jayna Stiles? Poor girl, living all alone the way she does. And always studying her books... says she wants to be a healer!" I could hear a young voice faintly in the back of my head. *I want to be an herbologist. I'll create medicines, and heal people!* I quickly drowned it out with the second shot, savoring the burning feeling as it rolled down the back of my throat.

My silence is all too telling. I've got to change the subject. "Many thanks. Is there anything else you can tell me?" He shrugged, grasping at anything else he could think of.

"I saw Gladys crying about something she lost."

I slapped a few more coins on the bar for good measure, "That'll do, my good man." *Sounds like a job to me. I'm good at 'finding' things that are 'lost'.* I wandered out of the bar, a bit too sullen and a bit too confident.

Virgil gave me an odd look as we wandered around town looking for this Gladys that the bartender mentioned. He was sort of staring at me as though he wanted to say something, but wasn't sure he could find the right words. "What is it, Virgil? Do you fancy me?"

He chuckled, "No, that's not it, madam. I just couldn't help but notice you have an exceptional knowledge of the world. I... I've never even heard of the Dragon Knights, and I don't remember the details of Tarant as well as you seem to. I just wanted to tell you that I'm impressed."

I shrugged. "I spent large portions of the last several years in Frederick's study, reading books or papers or whatever else I could get my hands on... and I was quite the gossip, too. I bet I can still incriminate half the housewives in Caladon."

He gave me a rather confused, pleading look, "I'm sorry... who is Frederick?" I rather suddenly realized how casually I'd just brought up my past. Not my past, but the past of that other life I was trying so desperately to run away from. The moment I stopped thinking about running it seemed I grew to accept it as a part of me once again. *I can't just pretend I didn't say it. I have to give him some kind of answer.*

I started stammering. "I... uh... if it's all the same to you, I'd rather not talk about that just now." *I'm truly sorry. I know how it feels to be on the receiving end of that. I suppose now you do as well.*

He began to protest, but then the same thing seemed to occur to him that occurred to me when we first arrived in Shrouded Hills to find Joachim missing. "I understand, madam. I'll say no more." *I'm sorry, Virgil. I've got more important things to do than to dally in the past.* We arrived outside of a rickety old house, barely more than a shack. I could hear sobbing noises from inside.

I entered and spoke softly, "Gladys?"

The old woman in front of me turned, wiping tears from her eyes. "Hello..." she creaked. I didn't quite know what to make of the whole thing. It seemed strange and weird. Cumbria had certainly fallen on hard times, but there was something terribly off with this situation that I couldn't quite place my finger on.

"Is there anything I can help you with?" I asked curiously. It once again struck me as odd that I'd just barged into the woman's house and began asking her if I could do her any favors. I blamed the whiskey.

The old woman's creaky, strained voice came out again, "I wouldn't wish to burden a stranger with my trouble." *That's a lie and you know it.*

"Please, tell me. Perhaps I could help." She was beginning to get on my nerves. I was admittedly irritable, but this was really quite silly. *Now that I think about it, her face seems awfully dry. If she's been sobbing over something so long that even the bartender knows about it, shouldn't she look the part?*

"A family heirloom has been stolen. A silver ring that belonged to my grandmother."

Well, I'm involved in it now. "Do you have any idea who could have stolen it?" If I was going to do this favor for the woman I'd do it properly. I didn't like how things looked, but that was no reason to be lazy about it.

She shook her head, "No. It has been missing for years. I fear I will pass before I see it again." *Years? For goodness' sake, get over it, woman! You don't mean to tell me you've been here sobbing your eyes out ever since. That's entirely ludicrous.*

I gritted my teeth, forcing back the desire to hollar at the old crone. I didn't like being lied to, but if I became belligerent I'd never find out the truth. "When did you last see it?"

She looked me straight in the eyes, "I entrusted it to my son before he died." *Is that supposed to make me feel sorry for you? All right... it worked.* Nevertheless, that wasn't really an answer of when and that was a somewhat important piece of information.

I had to ask, "When did he die?"

"Twenty years ago. I lost both him and my husband to the plague. I have been alone ever since."

Enough already. I didn't ask to be invited to your pity party. A ring could go an awful lot of places in twenty years. Even the woman had to know that it's probably in a pawn shop by now, collecting dust... unless she knew otherwise. With how hard she was trying to make me feel sorry for her I had to assume that was the case. I tried to think like she was, I needed to ask the right question if I was going to get any information out of her. She wanted to send me somewhere, but where? "Who else could I talk to about your son?"

Her response seemed almost prepared, she didn't have to think of it at all. "A man named Archibald was friendly with my son before he died."

Jackpot. So you've got some business with this Archibald fellow, eh? "How can I find this Archibald?"

"He was living down by the docks, last I heard."

"I will talk to him. Perhaps he knows something." Wordlessly the woman turned around and continued staring at the corner, her job for the time being done. She thought I'd been properly deceived, but in actuality I was just damned curious. I walked off towards the docks.

Virgil and I chatted some more as we traveled. "Madam, I mean no disrespect, but are you sure you're going to get what you're looking for out of this?"

I didn't want to tell Virgil I was just doing it for my own amusement, to satisfy my curiosity more than anything else. I didn't really want to tell him what I thought of the old woman, either. "Well, I... uh... is there something wrong about helping an old woman get her heirloom back?"

To my surprise Virgil smiled, "No, no madam. There's nothing at all wrong with that." *What's with you, anyway? Shouldn't you know better? I think you trust me a bit too much.*

The wind that blew off of the nearby ocean was a breath of fresh air compared to the stale, rotten stench of Dernholm. I lingered for awhile, carefully observing the small number of houses while I took in the refreshing atmosphere. It seemed like all of the houses were either abandoned or nobody was home with a single exception. I knocked on the door and a tall, older man answered it quickly. He was a grumpy looking old coot and huffed at me the moment he answered the door, "Yeah, what is it?"

I hesitated for a brief moment, but pressed on despite my initial reservations, "May I ask your name, good sir?" *I don't really have to ask. This is some kind of set up. Just what is it you're going to do with me, Archibald?*

He seemed to grow angry merely at my asking. "My name's Archibald. What of it?" His chest puffed up as if he was preparing to say or do something.

No backing out now. "Gladys sent me. She thinks you might know

something of a ring?"

"Gladys?! Tell that old hag I'll never give her the ring back! Never! if you come by here again, I will have my son Bernard give you a sound thrashing!"

Your threats will get nowhere with me, you cantankerous old fart. What kind of trick is this? Here I thought you'd at least try to bilk me out of some money or kill me. Anything! I decided to play the part of the unwitting fool a little while longer. "I can not believe you would be so cruel to an old lady, sir!" He didn't seem phased at all.

"You will leave my home immediatly or I will call my son Bemard! Do you hear me?!"

Hmph. Well, that went nowhere. "All right, I am leaving."

I stormed out of his house in a fury like never before. *What a tight-lipped old goat!* In my haste I quite literally bumped into a man minding his own business on the docks. I would've knocked him clear on his rump if there hadn't been a few barrels nearby for him to grab hold of and steady himself. "Greetings, miss," he said politely, wiping the fresh layer of dust off of his trousers.

Damn it all. "So sorry about that, good sir. I don't believe I've had the pleasure. Who are you?"

He brushed off his hands a bit, clearing them of the dust that had rubbed off from the barrels. "The name's Bernard. I work the docks here... what little work there is." *Ah, how fortuitous. Yes, that does seem to be a logical place for my investigation to continue.*

"Bernard? Are you the son of Archibald?" I asked innocently. I didn't want to tip my hand too early... this was my last chance to get to the bottom of things.

He looked uneasy when I asked him that question, worry and suspicion crossing his face. "Yes... why do you ask?"

I guess now's the time. "Gladys thinks your father might know something about a ring."

"Not this again! Every month or so she finds someone to send over

here to try to get that ring from my father! This is So tiresome, really. One would think they were schoolchildren the way they carry on!"

Yes, that's right... spare no details. I was suspicious of that old hag from the moment I set foot in her dilapidated old shack. "What do you mean?" "My sister and Gladys' son were engaged to be married some twenty years ago. Then the plague came... he shakes his head in sadness. they both died, along with Gladys' husband. The ring she sent you here to find was the engagement ring her son gave my sister."

That's it? That's the grand deception? Why the bloody hell didn't Gladys just tell me all of this in the first place? "Then why does she say it was stolen?"

"I dont know. It is some perverse game they have been playing over the last ten years. She finds someone to come look for the ring, my father yells at them and sends them away. Its really the only contact eather of them has with the outside world."

I supposed, if anything, I should've been more suspicious about why the bartender seemed to hesitant to tell me this particular bit of information. He knew it would lead me on a wild goose chase. I guess my curiosity had gotten the better of me yet again. "Have you tried to talk sense into them?" *It has to bother you, too. I don't imagine everybody leaves your father's house as easily as I did.*

"Yes, but I gave up on them long ago. My father doesnt want to hear anything about it from me. He just sits around, waiting for the next fellow, or woman, in your case, to come around asking about the ring so.he can yell at her."

That's it? It's just some twisted little game of theirs? And the whole town already knows about it so there's not even any sinister scheme for me to expose? Virgil was right, I had no reason to carry on with all that nonsense. "I see. Thank you for your time." Pah. To hell with both of them.

Chapter the Ninth: Reminders of the Old World

It was time for me to start looking around for dear old Sarah. That was the last bit of business that I really had to take care of in Dernholm and I wanted to make sure it got done before I got sick of the whole damned town and left it for good. I bribed one of the local vagrants with a spare bottle of wine I scrounged up from somewhere and he pointed me in the proper direction.

Virgil just couldn't keep quiet about the whole ring business, though. "Madam, about Gladys and Archibald..."

I cut him off. "It's all right, Virgil. You were right about them. I had no right poking my nose in where it didn't belong. I don't plan on wasting any more of my time with it and I apologize for not listening to you earlier."

He seemed like he was about to say something else, but he merely slumped his shoulders, "Yes, madam." *What? I admitted you were right! I can't win.* I wanted to ask him, or to try and think of something else to say but my mind was blank. Before I knew it we'd arrived at the house the vagrant pointed out.

I went to knock before realizing that only half of the door was even present to begin with. It sort of swung itself open as I half attempted to knock and the woman inside looked up at me. I smiled nervously, "Uh... good day, madam. Might you be Sarah Toone, daughter of Bessie?"

He suddenly looks very sad.

"Yes, yes I am. Why do you ask?"

I felt mean for even bringing it up, but she was the only person I could get any information out of anymore. "I am trying to find a way to free your mother's ghost." My intentions weren't exactly noble, but

what I needed to accomplish to get paid in the end could probably be considered a good thing.

She looked almost angry, then, though I didn't really suspect it was directed towards me. "Oh? And why, may I ask, are you doing that?"

Well, you see I'm being paid... yeah, all right already, I know I'm not exactly virtuous. I tried to explain myself as best I could without seeming like a completely selfish boor, even though that's just what I was, "Well, I spoke with your brother about the mine and he was rather upset. I offered to help."

"My brother? Upset? Why? He should be happy, the dog! He got what he wanted, after all."

Ah, right. Almost forgot about that. Could one of the two of you please stop hating the other just long enough to put your mother's ghost at rest? I would really appreciate it, and so would my purse. "He told me you didn't like him."

"Not like him? That is an understatement. Do you know what he did? He convinced my mother to sign the mine over to him, and then he sold it to those thugs in Tarant! She killed herself over that!"

It made sense, then, why Percy was so nervous that I was at his house to kill him. He'd been dealing with violent thugs. What I didn't understand was why he didn't just tell me all of this in the first place. I'd bet he had me pegged as a good person for some strange reason. He thought I might balk at helping him if I thought he'd done wrong by his mother. *The only mother figure I ever had was old Merle and I don't think I'd complain too much if her ghost haunted the old orphanage.* "How did he convince her to sign?"

"She always wanted me to run it, as my brother was notorious for bungling things. He convinced her that for legal reasons it should be in his name, as she was getting old and I was not yet of legal age. She resisted at first, but my brother always was able to wear her down. He was insidious in that way."

"But why did she kill herself over him selling it?" It wasn't a nice thing to ask, especially since the answer was so obvious. I needed all of the information I could get, however, and as long as Sarah kept talking I wasn't going to discourage her.

"Her only wish was that the mine stay in our family, as it had been for more than three generations. It was our heritage. She often told

me that she would rather be dead than to have anyone else but a Toone in it."

That's pretty much what I thought. Why else be so averse to signing it over to Percy? She knew he'd do something like this. I needed to keep Sarah talking, so dwelling too long on Percy's evils simply wouldn't do. "Did you know she's calling your name? Why is that?" Besides, my own evils were far greater.

"Yes, I had heard that... I don't know why. I think she realized that I was the only one she could trust. Perhaps she wishes she had come with me... or..."

she chokes back tears

"... or she feels I deserted her when she needed me. I just couldn't stand to watch her life being whipped away from her."

Oh now that's really too much. You can't blame yourself for what somebody else did. You're only responsible for yourself. I had to at least change the subject, while I was no saint I certainly wasn't going to let the poor woman sit there and sob as a direct result of my questioning. "Why did you move here, anyway? This place has seen better times."

"I knew what my brother was going to do as soon as he stole the mine from me and my mother. I couldn't bear to watch. I tried to get my mother to come with me, but she wouldn't leave her home. I moved here because I had nothing... I don't even own this place, it was deserted."

And so you, too, ran away. Oh, Sarah, I only wish my conscience were as light as yours. Still, both of us ran away when faced with a pain that we could not bear. I don't have a home to call my own anymore, either. She hadn't struck me as the type to pawn off her family's worldly belongings before leaving so I wondered exactly what her plan had been. "Your brother wouldn't help you out? He seems to be well off." That was, after all, why I stole into his house looking to pilfer a few things.

"Are you serious?!" She very nearly shouted, "I would never ask for his help. Never!" *I guess she didn't have a plan after all. Then again, neither did I.*

"What was your brother's excuse for selling the mine, anyway?" She seemed much angrier now, which was a good thing by my reckoning. Better than sobbing at any rate.

"He concocted some story about the buyers threatening his life if he didn't sell. I think he owed them money, actually, but he would never admit it."

So he owed a bit of money and then sold out his family to cover the debt? What a worthless sod. At least when I steal from people I do it for my own gain, not because I'm scared of some debt collectors. Does the man have no shame? I needed just one last bit of information. "Can you tell me who owns your family's mine now?"

"I can't recall offhand, but I think I wrote it down somewhere..." she shuffles through some papers

". Yes, here it is. Stanton Importers, Lion's Head Circle, Tarant."

Jackpot. "Thank you so much for your time, madam."

She nodded politely, "Think nothing of it." *I've got to head to Tarant eventually, anyway.* While I had been busily scurrying about and doing odd jobs for anybody that needed them I was quickly beginning to realize that precious few of them were paying off. My bank robbery and tavern gambling could only hold me for so long. Hoping that the local nobility would be a bit less stingy, I decided to pay King Praetor a quick visit before leaving.

The castle wasn't exactly difficult to find. It would've been harder to miss, in fact. It was midday so naturally they were allowing audiences with the king. I was escorted by a pair of guards into the throne room where the king actually stood up to greet me. He was considerably more polite than I'd imagined after hearing that nasty rumor about him, but I suppose that was one of the differences between nobility and people like myself. I would never be anything more than a street rat.

His voice was patient, and tired. It sounded just the slightest bit raspy, but that was to be expected for a man whose very job is to talk with people all day long, every day. "Ah, a maiden from beyond the city's walls. What can I do for milady?"

What a charming fellow. He even flatters a peasant girl like me. "How did you place me as from beyond the city walls?"

"Milady does not have the look of a citizen of Cumbria."

I disagreed. It was my opinion that traveling through dirt and mud for over a week had disguised me quite nicely. "My lord flatters me, I'm no different than your people." I did suppose that my clothing seemed a bit newer, despite the number of times it had been torn and subsequently sewed back together. I also looked a good bit healthier; not nearly so gaunt or sickly. Maybe Praetor was right after all, but that struck me as an incredibly sad thing.

"We are poor people now, with limited resources, and I fear my citizens are slowly starving. Cursed technology has toppled my dear Cumbria from its former glory."

Go ahead, blame technology. Just because you can't adapt doesn't make the world to blame. Despite any personal disagreements which I didn't dare voice, Praetor had given me just the opening I was waiting for. "Could I be of any service to the kingdom?"

"You have the look of a courier. There appears to be some sort of problem with Black Root, one of our outlying provinces. I could use someone to look into it."

I wanted to head that way anyway. It was everything I had been hoping for. I could even catch the train from Black Root to Tarant and take care of my business up there before returning. I wanted to make my conditions absolutely clear, however. "What's the pay?" *You don't have the 'look' of a citizen of Cumbria either. I know you can afford it.*

He didn't seem particularly surprised at my greed, which was a good thing in my book. "If you succeed in retrieving my taxes you'd be entitled to 200 coins, and, of course, my everlasting gratitude."

Awful cheap for a king, but I suppose this IS Cumbria. At least it's better paying than most of my other jobs and it's on my way anyway. I could always use the gratitude of a king. "Consider it done. I'll be leaving right away." At a gesture from the king one of the guards in the room marked my map with the location of Black Root and I was escorted out.

I'd planned on heading directly out of town, but on my way I smelled a peculiar scent coming from a nearby house. I couldn't quite place it and, as usual, my curiosity got the better of me. It smelled almost familiar and I simply had to know why. I knocked lightly on the door to the house and a petite little half-elven woman answered the door. "Uh, hello there... what can I do for you?"

I tried to sound friendly, despite the strange circumstances. Dernholm wasn't exactly a town where people randomly knocked on your door, and if they did it was probably bad news. "Greetings, madam. Might I ask who you are?"

"My name is Jayna... Jayna Stiles." She seemed nervous and unsure of herself, almost as if she found me intimidating for some reason. Her name sounded slightly familiar to me, too, and that was when it clicked.

Ah! The healer! That would explain the scent. Oh, how long it's been since I smelled that pungent aroma... "It's a pleasure to meet you, Jayna. Have you a moment?"

She seemed flustered, and uncertain. I could tell she wanted me to leave but she couldn't quite find the words, nor force them out of her mouth. Instead she simply acquiesced. "Uh... I suppose that I do. How can I help you?"

I couldn't help but take a liking to the young girl. In truth she was probably a great deal older than I, being half elven, but the way she acted made me think of her as young. Elves matured more slowly at any rate. I supposed that, more than anything, it was the association with herbs that made me fond of her. Nathaniel had been fond of herbology and the scent always reminded me of him. By extension, hanging around Jayna felt positively nostalgic. "What are you doing here in Dernholm, Jayna?"

"What am I doing here? Well, what does anyone really do in Dernholm? Not much to do in this town... wasn't always this way, to hear the way my parents used to talk about it." She seems a little sad, sighing.

"I guess you could say I'm a healer, if I'm anything at all..."

"What sort of healing do you do?" I bit my lip, hoping I wasn't too

rude to ask. My skin didn't itch at her presence, and the smell of herbs was everywhere. It wasn't difficult to figure out the answer but I wanted to hear her say it.

"Well... I don't really do any of it very well. There hasn't been a decent doctor around here for a very long time, and our best midwife died not too long ago. I really want to learn, but there's not really anyone to learn from."

She gets a determined look in her eyes.

"But I'm still trying! You see, it's really important to me that I become a great..."

"Why is that, Jayna?" That fire in her eyes... She had that same passion for her craft that Nathaniel did. It made me smile just seeing her youthful enthusiasm, and yet... I also felt a bit sad. Such is the way of nostalgia: happy for having the memories, and sad that they are now little more than a remembrance.

"Well..."

She looks to the ground.

"You see that this is difficult for her to talk about... there was a disease that came to Dernholm a few years ago. As I told you, there hasn't been a doctor here for a long time. We didn't have any medicines, and shipments from Tarant are very scarce..."

She hesitated a bit before continuing and I could tell it was an unpleasant memory. Regardless, I let her continue. *You don't get to talk to many people, do you? It's all right to tell me, you'll feel better if you get it out.*

"Well, my parents got sick, you see..."

Tears well up in her eyes.

"They were so brave, right up until the end... but they died. Many others died here as well. No one around knew how to deal with such sickness, and so all we could do was sit here and watch our loved ones pass away."

She dries her eyes.

"And it was then that I decided..."

Such is life in the old kingdom... such is life in many places. We've all got our own sad memories. Be thankful that the evil in yours is one of nature.

"I decided that I never wanted to watch people die that way again. I decided to become a great healer... to save others from the pain I felt when I saw my parents die. And so that's what I've been trying to do..."

Regardless of her actual age she was definitely young for a half elf. I almost felt like a mother to her. "How are your studies progressing?" For once I think I actually, genuinely cared about her answer. "Not too well, unfortunately. As I said, there's not anyone to learn from around here. I have a little healing skill, but I'm just no good at magick."

She lowers her voice, leaning towards me.

"Actually, I'm very interested in some of the newer technological practices..."

"Really? Do you really think technology is better?" I wasn't so much talking to her as I was with myself... re-living a conversation I had a long time ago, in another life. Jayna looked scared suddenly and I snapped out of it.

"Shhh! Keep your voice down! Don't you know? You can't even talk about such things around here... it's the law! King Praetor got it in his old noggin a long time ago that technology is terrible, and he doesn't want anyone even thinking about it."

She looks about.

"You see where THAT has gotten us..."

Praetor had been so polite, and yet... even a fool can be polite. Politeness is actually an attribute that is especially common among fools. Others are less likely to think you a dullard if you just smile and nod. "Do you know much about... er... THAT sort of healing?" She shook her head sadly. "Not a whole lot. I've read a few textbooks... I have to keep them well hidden, mind you... but there really just isn't much to be learned around here..."

I couldn't fathom why she would stay in such a technophobic town if she had nothing left anchoring her to it. Her parents were gone, and the kingdom around her was crumbling. If she didn't get out she might never get out. "Well, why don't you leave? Go to Tarant, maybe?"

She sighs.

"I can't really afford to. My parents weren't wealthy people, and I don't make much money here in Dernholm. Plus, it's not all that safe for a woman to be traveling all by herself. I'm afraid that I'm stuck here for now..."

It looked as though the two of us could help one another out. Virgil's magicks didn't always agree with me, and I was headed to Tarant anyway. "Hmmm. Maybe you'd like to come along with me..." *I know*

that my reasons are selfish, but I would be delighted to have you with me for at least a little while. If only for that scent, and for the memories that I recall when I look in your eyes.

Even as I thought of it I saw that passion flare up in her eyes again. "What? What do you mean?"

I can't very well tell her that she brings back warm memories of my past. "Well, I'm... er... travelling. I could use a scientific healer..." "Really? I mean, I don't know very much... I don't know how much help I would be..."

She was so quick to dismiss herself, but I wasn't going to take no for an answer. If there was one thing I would persist at it would be this. I could at least take her to Tarant, I'd be doing her as much of a favor as she would be doing me. "Perhaps we could learn things together...?"

She laughs aloud, clapping her hands together.

"Oh yes! That sounds just wonderful! I mean... I'll work my very hardest to learn while we're abroad... you can count on me, madam, I won't let you down..."

I smiled a rare, genuine smile. For the first time in a long time I felt true happiness, even if only a smidgen of it. "So... you'll come along, then?" She sounded so excited, so happy. I was quite glad I chanced to stop by.

"Yes! I would love to come with you. I'm ready to go right now!" I gestured towards the door, "Then let's do so..."



"I need to make a brief stop in Black Root, but we can catch the train to Tarant from there," I said. "It's the fastest way up to Tarant."

She gasped, "Really?! You're really going to take me to see the train? And I'll even get to ride on it?" Her excitement only made me laugh.

You deserve better than this, Jayna. Taking you out of here is the least I can do.

Chapter the Tenth: The Search For Wages Continues

Black Root was a refreshing change from the stagnance of Dernholm. It was no Caladon, or even Tarant, but it was a sight better than anywhere else I'd been in the last several weeks. The breeze that rolled in off of the sea was so much fresher than the sea of Dernholm, though that was hardly surprising.

The mayor's house was situated in the far corner of town, a grandiose monstrosity that exuded arrogance with its very presence. The half ogre servant that let me inside gave a clear message to potential thieves, too. *Why does it always have to be half ogres? The bloody things are everywhere lately.* The mayor himself tried to be charming, but I wasn't about to be fooled. I could see where his tax money had gone and it certainly wasn't to his citizens. "I am here on behalf of King Praetor."

He half snorted as though I'd just told him some kind of joke, the expression on his face growing darker and the tone of his voice firmer. "What of King Praetor?"

"He sent me for the taxes that Black Root owes." *If any of that money yet remains. If not, I wonder how many pawn shops I'll have to visit to sell off the contents of your mansion. I'm not taking no for an answer.*

"Black Root is with the United Kingdom now. We collect taxes only for Tarant."

Damnation. Bloody politics, always when I least expect it. Why couldn't you just be a greedy sod? I wasn't scared of trying to steal behind his half ogre's back, but I had a feeling Praetor wouldn't be terribly happy if I gave him the tax money and he later found out it was stolen and Black Root had defected to Tarant. "King Praetor would disagree."

"You are not of Praetor or yourself, my good woman. Cumbria has

left us to fend for ourselves too long. We are under the protection of Tarant now."

Well I'm not fond of you, either. Especially since you're a bloody idiot. "So the Tarant guards are keeping Black Root secure?" I already knew the answer, no matter how badly the mayor tried to hide it.

"Of course. They have their own procedures, but they have protected our fair town within their capabilities."

I wanted to laugh in his face, but I restrained myself. He almost sounded as if he truly believed Tarant gave a damn about his pathetic little town. Whether his allegiance lied with Tarant or Cumbria didn't even matter, it was on its own regardless. *Tarant will only start caring about your little town when it goes to war with Caladon, and that's precisely when you don't want to be involved with it.* "Within their capabilities?" I enjoyed taunting him. "What does that mean?"

"Well, there are certain rules of propriety, you know, probable cause and proof of wrongdoing, as it were."

His excuses were like music to my ears. *A selfish bastard like you deserves what he gets. Even I don't steal from the poor. I much prefer stealing from people like you.* "Is there some difficulty they can not deal with?" *Is there some difficulty they CAN deal with? I thought not.*

"I'm sure they will deal with our thievery problem in due time."

So there are thieves in these parts, eh? I ought to go introduce myself. "I shall rectify any thievery problem you may have." I idly wondered if the mayor saw through my thinly veiled lies or if he actually intended on telling me where to find the local thieves.

"Thieves stole my badge of office... my ceremonial silver dagger. If you can recover it from them, it would be all the proof I need to have them arrested."

"I accept your quest, my good man." *Oh goodness, he actually believes me. That's it, just tell me where the thieves are so I can help them the next time they come this way.*

"The thieves have been known to lurk somewhere near the outskirts of town. Their leader is a man named D'ak T'an, I believe. Godspeed, ma'am."

Jackpot. "I'll go find them right away." I hummed a merry little tune as I left the mayor's house. It would've been nice to have the tax money straight away, but another detour was tolerable if it brought even more profit. Thieves always knew where to find profit.

Jayna suddenly realized what I was doing when we crossed the train

tracks towards D'ak Taan's camp and she whispered to me nervously, "Madam, are you certain of this? I don't know that I like walking straight into the local den of thieves."

I tried to choose my response carefully. Jayna simply wouldn't understand my desire to rob the greedy old mayor blind and I honestly didn't want her to understand. Her innocence is what made her so charming. "I... er... I'm familiar with these types... I know how to handle them." She didn't seem convinced. *I'm starting to sound like Virgil. Hmmm.*

There was only silence as we continued onward, and Virgil's voice echoed in the back of my mind, *"I've, uh, dealt with buggers, er individuals like this before."* Before long we reached the thieves' camp. *Oh just great, more bloody half ogres. Everywhere I go more half ogres.* "Hello, friends. Just looking for some friendly company."
"...Polite conversation you won't find here, my friend. We are all thieves and few speak our language."
I didn't traipse all the way out here for the view, idiot. Don't you recognize your own kind? "Yes, I know of you. I seek D'ak Taan."

He eyed me up and down carefully, only now noticing the tears in my muddled old dress. "And what business would you have with D'ak Taan, if he were here?" *Please tell me you were reconsidering my skills. Damn it all, I need to sew this thing back up again.*

"I was hoping for a conference among thieves." Either he'd believe me or he wouldn't, but if he wanted to keep what was in his pockets it would be the former. I especially hoped things wouldn't come down to stabbing. I didn't like stabbing when it didn't have to be done.
"I see. So you fancy yourself a thief."

Fancy is such a fickle word. Was robbing the Shrouded Hills bank just a romantic dream I had? I think not. "You're lucky you've anything left in your pockets." It was true. I was trying to behave with Jayna around. If I'd been alone I might've just stabbed him and ran off with the loot. *No. I'm better than that now. I'd have at least stolen it behind his back instead of stabbing him to get it.*

"Hmm. I doubt you have the skills to back up your tongue."
He was trying to manipulate me into doing something for him and I didn't just fall for his trap, I dove in with both feet. "A test, then?"

Well now I've gone and done it. I can be a real bloody idiot sometimes.

"I'm always interested in a little sport. There are certain tasks I need done..."

"I've no doubt I'm up to the challenge." *Whatever it is has to be better than getting pounded by half ogres... yours or the mayor's.* At least I had the sense to accept my fate. Trying to back out now would've only undermined the image of confidence I'd been projecting.

"There are two jobs, but you can only choose one, so do so carefully. One job is for a good thief, and the other for a master in commerce. And really, is there a difference between the two?"

Of course there is. One winds up behind bars when she flubs up. The other doesn't settle for cheap pawn shops when getting rid of a large quantity of varied goods. Take a wild guess which one I am? "There's no better thief than I." That was a damned lie if I ever told one (and I told plenty), but a lack of confidence never got you anywhere when dealing with the local scum.

"To the west of the town proper, there is a small farm inhabited by an old hedge wizard... Within his house is a chest. Bring its contents back to me. Of course, we'd do it ourselves, but the Tarantian Guards in Blackroot watch us very closely these days."

D'ak Taan and I were thieves, and though we might share plenty of words our only true language was the language of money. "What's in it for me?" *The thief's motto.*

"If you succeed, I'll give you everything we recently procured from Blackroot, including some of the mayor's personal items."

"Done." I held my laughter for the time being, waiting until I was back beyond the river before letting loose. "I can't believe he's going to pay me with exactly what I need to blackmail him!"

Virgil chuckled alongside me, "Not every thief can be a smart thief."

Jayna was merely confused. "What? You mean you're going to double cross him?" She was far too sweet of a girl to be traveling with the likes of me. I resolved to drop her off at Tarant before going any further. I couldn't bear to be the one to shatter her childlike innocence.

"Nevermind, Jayna. It's not worth worrying about, I've got time to think about how I want to do this." My excuses were quite transparent, but only because I found it so difficult to lie to Jayna. I

hoped she wouldn't see through them, though.

She seemed a tad confused, but she accepted my explanation readily enough. *Good. Now let's get out of here.* The train didn't leave for another few hours so I had plenty of time to kill. I wandered into the inn for a drink or two, and naturally all of the gossip that came with it. "Good day, bartender. I'd like a shot of whiskey if you would, please." The shot glass was empty mere seconds after he had filled it. "Anything happening hereabouts?" I asked.

"I hear that Herkemer Oggdoddler was one of Dernholm's finest soldiers back in his prime. He is said to be highly trained in all of the necessary skills of war."

That's a fantastic idea, my good man. Brushing up on my stabbing skills sounded like a wonderful way to pass the remaining couple of hours before the train departed. *Isn't that what I came here for in the first place? I don't even remember.*

Chapter the Eleventh: The Fine and Traditional Art of Stabbing

There were a few men wandering about the ex-soldier's house, keeping themselves busy with whatever they could find. Despite the number of people, I knew immediately which one I was looking for. He was an older, grizzled-looking man with a deep scar on his left cheek. I approached him quietly and respectfully, "Hello, there, good sir."

He looked at me with a hint of curiosity in his weary eyes. He saw how the tears in my dress revealed far more than would be acceptable in polite society, but rather than focusing on how I barely managed to remain decent I could see him quietly judging how the tears might have gotten there in the first place. A claw mark in one sleeve, a clean cut across the shoulder that could only have been made by a blade. He saw me not as a whore but as a fighter and the tone in his voice reflected it. "Hello there, madam." It felt good to be respected to at least some degree.

"Please allow me to introduce myself. I am Herkemer Oggdoddler. Who might you be?"

Sammy, sammy, son of Merle... Merle was a crone anyway. "I am known as Samantha Colburn." I didn't want to be rude and blurt out my request only seconds after meeting him. I had time before the train arrived anyway, so I made polite conversation. "What is it you do here, Mr. Ogg?"

"I was a soldier... a veteran of the wars with Tarant and Dernholm." He hesitates a little.

"I am retired now, living here in Blackroot. I sometimes offer instruction in martial skills to those who qualify and have a genuine interest in learning. It is honest money, and I enjoy the company."

"If it is not an imposition, could you tell me of the war?" I was really beginning to long for the limitless books and articles in Frederick's

study. It hadn't occurred to me previously just how much joy I took in learning about the world around me. Traveling around the world wasn't nearly as comfortable as Frederick's cushy chair but learning from my own experiences and chatting with others had a peculiar draw to it as well. If only it weren't so lonely.

With pride and bitterness.

"I am one of the last who remember the war. Although I would prefer not to. Since the day that Cumbria went down to defeat, the policies of the Tarantian Industrial Council have bled the kingdom of Cumbria dry and reduced its capital Dernholm to ruins."

Dernholm... such a pitiable sight. I'd seen pictures that had been painted out of sheer respect and adulation for the splendor of the city, back in its prime. Now, my shoes were still stained with the muck and refuse from the foul heap the city had become. *And they want to do the same to Caladon...* Herkemer continued his story.

"In the war I served in the elite guard of Cumbria, the Dragon Knights. We were unmatched with the sword, mace, or axe. Trained from childhood, we were. First squires, then men-at-arms, and then knights serving our King. We fought with honor and virtue."

"With Warren Pel Dar?" I asked without thinking. He nodded grimly and I blushed, embarrassed, "Sorry. Please, continue." Bringing up his deceased companion so callously was even less polite than blurting out a demand for training would have been. The saddened look on his face only made me feel all the more guilty. I remained quiet so as not to make a further fool of myself, and eventually he continued on.

"The war with Tarant was different from all other wars. It saw the end of the age of chivalry. The noble knight was replaced by a line of green recruits with guns."

Guns. To hell with them. I was no lover of magick, but neither was I fond of guns. My hatred for them was entirely personal, but that didn't make it any less real. The idea of them didn't bother me, and actually I was even a little curious. *No. Never again. I will never use another gun for the rest of my life.*

"At the start of the war, the rifle was only issued to Tarantian sharpshooters, but by the end they were standard issue to every recruit in the Tarantian Army! Combined with ranked unit formations to concentrate fire, the Tarantians were able to control the battlefield. And to do it with inferior soldiers!"

I was tempted to speak out against the damnable things but I felt bad enough for interrupting his story once already. I continued listening quietly, enraptured with the older man's tale. There was something enthralling about listening to the way he described it, the look his eyes held when he remembered the very things he was trying to tell me about. It was entirely different from reading about things in a book and I absolutely loved it.

"It was the end of years of tradition."

He shakes his head in sadness.

"I witnessed Knights gunned down as they offered challenges on a field of honor. The cowardice of this new kind of war is a disgrace!"

Hmph. Chivalry, my foot. By gun or by blade, the morality of killing does not change. No matter how you justify it we're both damned and there's nothing we can do about it. Perhaps it was the whiskey, but I was feeling especially belligerent.

"The only weakness to their formations was that they could not stand the shock of melee. When we could engage them hand-to-hand, victory was ours! Our tactics became those of ambush, of fighting in the woods, hills, and mountains, where the closeness of the terrain aided our style of fighting."

It sounded like I would've fit right in, except that I was probably only two years old when it happened, if I'd even been born at all. I didn't offhand remember exactly when the war started. At the moment exact dates didn't seem particularly important anyway. There was something about hearing it straight from Mr. Ogg that made it seem less like a history lesson and more personal.

"But these are tactics used by a weaker force against a stronger force. We had many glorious victories in battle. But eventually, and at great cost, the Tarantians prevailed, and we lost the war. The Cumbrian military was shattered, disarmed, and disbanded. The Kingdom of Cumbria ceased to exist as a military power in Arcanum."

Although I wasn't fond of Tarant either it seemed to me that only good could come from less military might in the world. More people would stay alive that way, and less people would be paid for killing. Although I could sympathize with the man who had no choice but to make combat his profession, I could not feel sadness at the idea of men killing each other for pay. I only felt pity.

"For two generations Cumbria languished as an economically abused, technologically impaired backwater in the shadow of Tarant. Its

once-fine folk moved away to find peace here in Blackroot. I am reconciled to it. The war was a long time ago and we lost..."

He looks at me as if he had forgotten me were there.

"Please forgive an old man his ramblings, you have been most patient."

"Sir, you do not ramble. It has been my pleasure." I couldn't help but notice just how frequently I was actually being kind and honest as of late. It was a startling change, and I wasn't entirely sure what to make of it. *It's not as though I've suddenly turned over a new leaf. I'm traveling with Jayna for selfish reasons, and I really do enjoy hearing stories of the world.*

"You have been very patient... the sign of a good student. If you ever have need for training in Melee, Dodge, Spotting Traps, or Firearms, I will accept you as a pupil."

I had nearly forgotten my initial reason for visiting the man, but being good at stabbing was an unfortunate necessity. "Would you object to showing me what you know about melee, Mr. Ogg? I've had to defend myself a rather unfortunately large number of occasions lately."

"I offer instruction in four skills: Dodge, Melee, Spotting Traps, and Firearms, as I have said, for 500 coins. You must be an apprentice already, and you must have sufficient skill."

"I am sorry, but I can't meet your price of 500 coins just at this moment. If you would excuse me for a bit I will return shortly."

Hmmm.

"Take your time, madam. I'm not going anywhere." He reassured me. *But I, on the other hand, have a train to catch... and I do so hate to leave empty handed.*

"It is rumored that Tulla is located..."

Perhaps pub philanthropy is a purely Cumbrian trait? I could learn to like this country after all, even if it is a bit backwards. Tulla was the legendary city of mages, said to exist in the very center of the uninhabitable wasteland to the North of Ashbury known as the Vendigroth Wastes. There wasn't much information to be had on it as the rumor went that the mages there were quite reclusive. Few were even able to reach the city, and fewer still were ever welcomed inside of its walls, but its existence was no hoax. *Thanks for the donation, good fellow. I've some training to get to.*

"Your training is complete. Is there anything else?"

Mr. Ogg was quite the excellent teacher and I learned a great deal from him in just a short time. He taught me better how to hold my blade when I struck, and a more precise way of aiming that made it more difficult to fumble when my opponent was fast on his feet. When the training was finished I hungered for even more knowledge, even if it was knowledge I hoped I wouldn't have to use. "Who could train me to be a master of melee?"

"Garrick Stout is the master of melee. He has proven himself the best in numerous passages of arms. His skill is legendary and respected throughout Arcanum, but his prowess has bred conceit in his character. It is regrettable that so many seek him for his wisdom."

"Hmph. It is a pity... arrogance is a fool's luxury and if he pursues the mastery of melee to the exclusion of all else he is a fool indeed." I didn't relish the idea of seeking out an arrogant, self-important sod for training if I didn't absolutely have to.

"He is a crass man. Unchivalrous and lecherous in his affairs. If abandoning all that is pure and good is the consequence of mastery, then I shall never pursue it. I could learn nothing from such a man. He still lives in Dernholm, I believe; they have made him Captain of the Guard. I can remember when that position was held by honorable men. Disgusting..."

"He will get what is coming to him, I am sure. No man can breed such hatred and subsequently outlive it." I paused as I heard a train just arriving in the distance. "Ah, many apologies, Mr. Ogg, but I have a train to catch. Thank you so much for your time."

"It was no trouble at all, madam. You are an excellent student." I blushed, gave him a quick curtsy, and shuffled over to the train station as fast as I could. I would've loved to stay and chat with him longer, but the next train wouldn't be arriving for a full day and I didn't want to have to pay for a night at an inn when I could avoid it. Besides, I was excited to get on with my journey.

Incomplete or garbled text

"Tarant please, madam." I could hear Jayna squeaking excitedly behind me. I turned just a bit to glance at her and smiled when I saw her pointing excitedly at the train. Virgil was smiling, too.

Incomplete or garbled text

"Answer honestly, your..."

"Certainly. I would never even think of lying." *Ironically, that's*

probably the biggest lie I ever told.

"Are you, or is any member of your party, a practitioner of magic?"

Am I the only one that doesn't actually pose a threat to this train? "Ah, well, Virgil does use a bit of magic... and Jayna here is a half-elf. So sorry." I blushed and Jayna started looking concerned. I mouthed "Don't worry about it." to her silently and she nodded.

Garbled text

"I assure you, Virgil is completely harmless. He can barely use magic at all." Virgil cleared his throat rather purposefully. I winked at him and turned back to the ticket seller, "Truth be told, he can't even get it to work half the time. I'll be set upon by a bear or some vicious beast and he'll have to try healing me three or four times before it'll stick!" The ticket seller and I laughed together just a bit and Virgil slumped his shoulders. *Come now, it's all in good fun... and I'd rather not be turned away from this train.*

"Are you carrying any magickal items? Have you been approached and asked to carry any magickal items by people not associated with your group?"

Well there is that funny dagger I pilfered from someone or another. I've yet to get it identified, but carrying it does make me feel uncomfortable.

"Of course not, I wouldn't have any use for such things. Hooray for modern technology!" I laughed nervously, but the ticket seller didn't catch on. Virgil, knowing better, started giving me a 'look'.

"Which of the following categories best describes your physical age?

A: Less than 20 years old. B: 20 to 50 years old. C: 50 to 100 years old. D: More than 100 years of age."

"I, uh... I really don't think any of us are above a hundred." I looked at Jayna with uncertainty and she shook her head in agreement.

"We're all under a hundred, madam. Come now, I may not be young but I don't look that old, do I?" The ticket seller gave me a rather unamused look that suggested I wasn't the first 'clever' customer that had made such a joke.

"Are you traveling with summoned elementals, animated dead, or controlled, turned to stone, or otherwise physically challenged party members who will demand additional time and assistance in boarding the train?"

"That's... an awful specific question, isn't it? Uh... no... no, we're quite good in those regards. Do people really..." She nodded at me with a

frightened expression. "Oh my...." was all I could respond. "Do you have either knowledge and practice, or enscribed parchments or charged magickal items with any of the following magickal spells: Fear, Body of Fire, Call Fire Elemental, Jolt, Bolt of Lightning...?"

I've barely even heard of half of those and I'm certainly no ignoramus!

"No. You must believe me, we're totally harmless. To be perfectly frank I don't even know what you're talking about."

"Thank you for answering these questions. You're eligible for reservations in the First Class compartments. The conductor at the front of the train will help you."

"That's wonderful, madam, thank you muchly. We're ready to board the train immediately."

"That'll be 75 coins per passenger." I grumbled but handed her the coins. *That's robbery, I tell you. Why I could only afford two train rides if I made a quick stop at another pub. Is technology not supposed to be available to the masses?!* She handed me three boarding passes in return and pointed to a man standing by the train. "The conductor is right over there."

I wandered over to the train, Jayna lagging behind slightly as she marveled over it. Virgil stayed with her to make sure she kept moving, albeit slowly. *Silly girl, but I suppose that's why I'm fond of you.* I approached the man the ticket seller had pointed to, "Excuse me, sir, are you the conductor?"

"Yes madam, I am the conductor. Can I be of assistance?"

Jayna and Virgil finally caught up with me. Jayna clapped me on the shoulder excitedly and whispered a thank you into my ear. "I'd like to board the train." I handed the boarding passes to the conductor.

He was a rather jovial fellow, but I suppose one would have to have a certain passion for technology to work with the train on a daily basis. He looked over the boarding passes carefully, ensuring they weren't forgeries. *They would be, but I'm no good at that sort of thing, so you're safe for now.*

"You are free to board the train. We are about to leave. All aboard for Tarant! All aboard!"

I hopped on the train along with Virgil who seemed distracted and

Jayna who was also distracted but in an entirely different manner. I left them both to their thoughts and simply dozed on the way. Although the train was rather new by modern standards it wasn't the first time I had ridden it.

I dreamt of Nathaniel, which wasn't surprising given how much Jayna reminded me of him. I re-lived a memory I had of going to the beach with him and playing around in the water. I kept telling him that he was going to get sucked into the ocean and his body would wind up at Razor's Point, but... he was just so full of confidence. I was jostled awake by the train's arrival, but a melancholy mood crept over me as I grew reaccustomed to what my life had become. Shuffling off of the train with the others was slow, my thoughts still focused on Nathaniel; I missed him terribly. I carefully wiped a tear from my eye before Virgil could notice it.



"Tarant at last," I announced. Jayna squealed and ran out in front of the station. I couldn't really blame her if she'd been in post-war Dernholm her entire life. I glanced at Virgil and he merely nodded, his face a mixture of relief and nervousness. I felt the same way.

Chapter the Twelfth: The Center of Technological Invention

The smell of dust and oil hung heavy in the air as we wandered out of the station after Jayna. Although Tarant was different and quite a bit dirtier, at the moment it was the closest I'd been to home in a very long time. I welcomed the filth, the rude strangers, and the myriad of unpleasant noises that pierced the afternoon air. Somehow those things which I had once grown to loathe were now a comfort.

I looked around outside a bit, wondering if Jared were on duty at this time of day. I took in the street lights and the busy citizens, and even stared at the tranquil little canal that ran alongside the street. My eyes finally settled on the man standing to my left. He wore a guard's uniform sporting a metal tag with the name "Jared" crudely embossed onto it, and the expression on his face looked as though his mother had just died. I pulled Wilhemina's note out of my pocket and handed it to him. "Hello, Jared, I'm not sure if you remember me; I'm Wilhemina's friend. I've traveled quite a ways carrying a particular note with me and I've taken good care of it so that I might deliver it to you here. It's addressed to you, from Wilhemina."

He took the note eagerly from my hands and read it, shaking nervously. He finished quickly and looked back up at me, "Wilhemina! Where is she?" *As polite as ever, I see. You're welcome.*

My heart nearly caught in my throat as I tried to force the words out. I'd never been terribly fond of Jared, but it was impossible to distance myself from the news I was trying to deliver. I'd been somewhat fond of Wilhemina and even I felt loss at her passing. Jared would never be able to handle it. "I'm sorry. She's dead."

The memory of the doctor's deep, soothing voice replayed in my head. No matter how soothing it had been, no matter how kind he

was trying to be... I hated him. *"I'm afraid there's nothing I could do, madam. The bullet pierced his right lung... there isn't a doctor in the world fast enough. He passed on just minutes ago. I'm terribly sorry.* I forced the tears back, not willing to show such blatant weakness in front of Jared, and especially not in front of Virgil. "My condolences, sir. She was a fine woman and she..." I nearly choked; I was telling him the same things that everybody had tried telling me. "She passed before her time. I'm terribly sorry."

He dried his eyes on his uniform sleeve and looked up at me pathetically. His face was flushed red and his voice came out weak and uneven. "I know I've no right to ask this of you, but... could you do me a favor?"

I was having far more difficulty with the situation than I'd imagined. It was all I could do not to break down and begin sobbing right alongside Jared, but I simply couldn't. I sighed deeply, trying desperately to calm myself. I needed to get away from him, to somehow forget, but I didn't want to be completely unsympathetic. "Depends what it is you're asking."

"Could you be some assistance to me? At the corner of Devonshire Road, I have a post..."

This was too much. It wouldn't be the first time I'd seen a stonecutter about a tombstone, and the memories of the last time simply wouldn't leave me alone. *No. I'm a new person, I have nothing to do with that other life anymore. I don't have to do anything I don't want to do. I don't have to put up with these memories!* "I suppose you expect me to do this for free?" My voice was firm and cold, so distant as to be completely unaware of the pain that Jared was in.

"Madam!" Virgil objected, staring at me worriedly. *Don't 'madam' me, Virgil!* Jayna looked confused and worried, and I could tell the whole situation was making her sad as well. *No... he wouldn't want it like this. I may be trying to run away, but even if I become a new person what is the point if I only become a monster?*

Jared whined at me, tears starting to dampen his uniform. "I am afraid I have no money to offer. Please, I beg of you..."

"I suppose I can help you out, regardless." Virgil relaxed visibly and

Jayna started to smile slightly. *Just a little while longer... I have to hold it together. I'm not being myself right now.*

"Oh, thank you... thank you, madam." Jared sobbed.

Do shut up. "It's no trouble at all, good sir. I will return later." I turned away from Jared and purposefully stalked across the street, putting as much distance between us in a short time as possible. I stopped on the other side to catch my breath, leaning up against a building and breathing in deeply, calmly, eyes closed.

Virgil put a hand on my shoulder gently. "Madam?" His voice was quiet and worried.

"I'm fine, Virgil." I opened my eyes and stared at him, gaining a much better grasp on my emotions than I'd had only moments before.

"We've still got errands to run before the day's over, do we not? We'd better not dawdle for too long."

"Madam..." Jayna pleaded.

"Come along, Jayna. You don't want to get left behind in a big city like this. You're not used to how things work here." She nodded slowly and silently, following along as we went.

I found myself standing next to the office for the Tarantian. I nearly passed it by without a thought, but then... *newspapers are always looking for help... a bit of work could get my mind off of things.* I shook my purse to get an idea of its contents, then grudgingly entered the office. "Greetings, sir. Might I ask your name?"

"I'm Mr. Wright, editor of the Tarantian, the finest newspaper in all the land. Who are you?"

"My name is Samantha Colburn." If I'd had proper parents I bet I wouldn't have been teased so harshly. It's easy to poke fun at the orphanage girl. I so often wished one of those little brats would have to put up with Merle for just one week and then I'd see if they ever teased me again. "I'm looking to make some additional coin and I was wondering if you had any jobs I could do."

"Well, this is the Tarantian. News is our business. The first thing that pops to mind when you mention work is news. Do you have any

newsworthy stories? We pay quite well."

His words echoed through my mind... *We pay quite well*. Anybody that thought I would refuse easy money like that clearly didn't know me well enough. "Well, I am the sole survivor of the IFS Zephyr. Does that qualify?" I smiled at him smugly, already knowing the answer. "No! YOU? You are the sole survivor from the IFS Zephyr tragedy? What a godsend! I must have your story! I'll pay you coin, on the spot, if you'll answer my questions." 500 did seem to be the going rate for me to answer questions. "500! You've got yourself a story, Mr. Wright! Ask away!"

He pulled out a pad of paper and began jotting notes as we spoke. I told him everything that came to mind. The deaths of the other passengers, the explosions, gunfire, and even the strange flying machines. He wrote it all down as excitedly as a small child who just received a new toy.

Looking very strange, a mixture of shock and elation.

"Samantha Colburn! You've just given me the story of a lifetime! Thank you so much. Here... here's the coin I promised. You've more than earned it. I've got to get this to the presses immediately! Goodbye!"

I'm not letting you go that easily. 500's just a start. This is Tarant! "Wait! I know you're in a hurry... but is there anything else I can do?" He thought about it for a moment and handed me a note.

"Alright... here. This is a payment note. I need it delivered to Mrs. Halster. Her house is located at the corner of Devonshire and Vermillion. Return to me after delivery, and I'll give you the coin." "Alright. I'll be back soon." There were all kinds of jobs available for anybody who could work up the gumption to just ask. You didn't even have to be willing to break the law... though that willingness often made for far better profit with far less work. ...*there isn't a doctor in the world fast enough*. I forced the memory out of my mind and continued on.

Virgil nudged me quite hard as we crossed the street over to Mrs. Halster's house. "Madam, I'm not so sure that was a wise idea. We still don't know anything about those assassins."

"Oh hogwash, Virgil. We haven't seen them since Shrouded Hills. They've totally lost us by now. We're perfectly safe!" I was probably

not treating the situation with the gravity it deserved, but I didn't want to take any advice from Virgil. I knew I was being petty, and that he was probably right, but there wasn't much I could do about it anymore.

He stared down at his feet and twirled his quarterstaff absent-mindedly. "If you say so, madam."

Jayna looked at me with wide eyes. "Assassins?"

"Uh... nothing to worry about, dear girl. It's in the distant past. Don't you worry about a thing." I wasn't really sure why she was still following me, but for the time being I certainly wasn't going to complain. I had to leave her behind some point, but I wasn't quite ready yet. She reminded me so much of Nathaniel that I just couldn't bear to let her go. I knew it was wrong, but as long as I remained in Tarant I allowed myself that little indulgence.

Mrs. Halster seemed to be expecting me when I arrived. "I'm here from the Tarantian, madam. Here you go," I handed her the note. "Thank you."

She examines the note.

"Yes, everything seems to be in order. Here's a little something for your trouble, miss. Goodbye."

I DO accept tips. "Thank you, ma'am. Goodbye." I wandered back across the street to the Tarantian just in time to catch Mr. Wright locking up on his way out. "I have delivered the note to Mrs. Halster."

"Well done, thank you. Here's the 75 coin I promised. Now if you'll excuse me, I really must be going."

"Of course, Mr. Wright. Good day to you." He took off down the street at a full run. *That's really going to come back and bite me in the ass, isn't it? Well, no sense worrying about that until it comes down to it. Where was I...? Ugh, the stonecutter's.* It had been a long time since I was last in Tarant, but it was less confusing to me than most towns. I found East End Avenue easily enough and followed it all the way to the stonecutter's.

"It is my satisfaction to introduce myself to you, miss," he said as I

entered his shop. "My name is Joseph. I'm the stone cutter here in Tarant. I make headstones and such."

I was so focused on getting out of there as quickly as possible that I ended up coming off quite curtly. "Jared sent me. His girl has died and he needs a head stone. He can't leave his post so he asked me to come deliver you the message."

"Oh, how sad. I will be sure to stop by later to speak with him about it. Thank you."

He said it with about as much emotion as 'please pass the salt'. *Well, he does carve headstones for a living. I suppose he sees this sort of thing all the time. I don't envy the poor bastard one bit; it'd take a hardened soul to do that job.* "I'll be going now." I pushed my way out of the shop hurriedly, walking quickly enough that neither Virgil nor Jayna could really say a word to me about anything. That was exactly the point.

I couldn't face Jared just yet, I had to give myself at least a few more minutes to calm down before he got me all weepy again. In order to kill some time I stopped into the zoological society on my way past. Intellectual pursuits had always interested me and it seemed like this entire section of Tarant was full of them. I made a note to visit it again during my stay.

There were only three exhibits but they were quite fascinating. In addition to the spectacular dragon's skull (which I marveled over for at least three minutes, carefully noting the lair on my map for later visitation) there was also a petrified egg and an ancient chest that had never been opened.

The plaque next to the egg read, 'This petrified egg was found in the lair of the Great Dragon. The child inside was only months from hatching before Bellerogrim was killed.' *So close to avoiding extinction. Truly a shame. Not that I'd relish living in a world with hungry dragons.*

The safe was also of a particular interest to me, though admittedly a less academic one. 'This ancient iron chest was unearthed in the lair of Bellerogrim. It seems to be older even than the dragon itself. No one has ever been able to open it.' Of course I pulled out my lockpicks, exploring the insides of the lock curiously. Truly it was like

no other lock I'd ever encountered. I felt along the walls of the lock with my picks, mapping them out carefully in my head, trying to get an idea of exactly what kind of a key would open such a lock. I'd never seen anything like it and I was truly baffled. I nearly broke my damned picks just trying to gently press it open. It drove me mad not knowing what was inside, but I had to give up my attempts when the lady in the zoological society's reception room grew suspicious. I got out of there right quick.

Jared looks up from the ground slowly as me approach. You see tears running down his cheeks, though his expression is one of stoicism.

"Yes, what is it?"

My voice was like stone and I lacked the propriety to even look Jared in the eyes, instead staring past him to the plaque on the wall that read 'Vermillion Station'. "Good evening, Jared. I spoke with the stone cutter. He will be dropping by."

Jared nodded before staring back at the ground, "Please, leave me in peace."

Not even a damned thank you after all I've gone through for you. You're lucky I'm as out of sorts from this whole business as you are or I'd really give you a piece of my mind. My job finally finished and a well-deserved rest clearly in order, I strolled down Vermillion Road towards the Bridesdale Inn looking for a room.

"What can I help you with?"

The lady at the front desk was as friendly as anybody ought to be when providing a service. It's bad business to be rude to customers. I was glad for her pleasant disposition since I really wasn't in the mood to deal with anything else going wrong. "I will be in town a while. I would like a room for one week."

"Ah! But of course... the fee for one night..."

Although I did just receive a substantial sum from the Tarantian it still felt silly to be paying full price when I could pay the same only for the days I was sure I would be using. "You don't offer a reduced price for payment in advance?" *At these prices I'll have to rob half the shops in Tarant just to stay here long enough to find out what I need to know about this damned ring.*

"I am sorry, madam. Bookings have been extremely busy of late. I am quite surprised we even have a room available. I am certain it will not last long should you decline to take it."

I sighed and, unwilling to deal with it any longer, I handed the coins over to her. *You cheap wench! I'm going to take those back from you.* "Thank you, milady! You will find your room just down the hall. You'll have use of it for the next seven nights. The door will be unlocked. I do hope you enjoy your stay."

I said, "Thank you," as politely as I could muster. Virgil, Jayna, and I headed to our room for the night to get some much needed rest. Not only had my sleep on the train been filled with painful dreams, but the entire ordeal with Jared afterward had really made me desperate to escape for a while. After we had all gotten settled I excused myself for a just a brief moment before returning.

I'll be taking those back, thank you very much. I was almost glad she didn't offer a discount. I liked free much better.

I prepared a nice, hot bath when I returned to the room, not even bothering to ask if either of the other two wanted to go first. Wordlessly, I slipped inside and simply sat in the tub. I barely even cleaned myself at all, even though it had literally been weeks since I'd last had the pleasure of a good bath. Instead, I buried my face in my hands and quietly sobbed.

Chapter the Thirteenth:

Wherein We Chase Wild Geese and Other Like Things

I'd been in the bath for nearly two full hours when I was interrupted by a knock on the door. "Are you alright in there, madam?" It was Virgil.

No, in fact I am not. I don't know what it is you're running from, but I don't think you'd fare much better if you quite unexpectedly came face to face with it. "I'll be fine, Virgil. Just... you know... being extra careful to wash up after the last few weeks of travel."

"Of course, madam." It was obvious he saw through my lie. "I won't pester you about it any more then. I'll be getting some sleep. Good night."

I sighed, "Good night, Virgil." I heard the creak of the bed as he flopped down onto it. With a deep sigh I finished washing up as quickly as I could and got some sleep myself. Jayna was already out cold by the time I emerged, and if Virgil wasn't asleep yet he made no sign to reveal as much.

Sleep came to me slowly, even though I was awfully tired. My mind simply wouldn't settle down. When sleep finally did come I dreamt again of the past. Thankfully I dreamt not of Nathaniel, but of Frederick. I almost felt guilty for that, but at the time it was a much needed comfort. Waking was no more pleasant than it had been on the train, and throughout the entire morning my mind still remained firmly rooted in the past. *Oh, Frederick... are you waiting for me to return? No, you wouldn't... you had to have been expecting this...*

"Good morning, madam." Virgil greeted me as I started to open my

eyes. He was looking down at me with a decidedly worried look, but his voice was even and soothing. "Jayna's just finishing up in the bath. If you wouldn't mind, I'd like to pay the telegraph office a visit when you're both ready."

I was still groggy and my mind was reluctant to depart from its current train of thought. I nodded, only half understanding what I was agreeing to, "Yes, Virgil, that will be fine." *Damnation, he means to meet up with Joachim! Pah, I can't put it off forever, can I? Might as well get it over with.* Once Jayna was ready we headed for the telegraph office at once, finding it along Kensington Broadway near many of the shops in town. I interestedly glanced into many of the shop windows, quickly jotting down prices in my notebook to keep a tally of how much money it would take before I could afford everything I wanted.

"How may we at the Tarant Telegraph Office help you today?"

"Do you have a telegram for Virgil?" I blurted out hastily. Virgil gave me a questioning look. *I suppose it would've made more sense just to have him ask.*

He shuffles some papers around.

"Yes, we do as a matter of fact. That will be coins."

Definitely should've had him ask. This is what I get for being so damned scatterbrained. I paid the man his two coins and took the telegraph from him in return. Since I paid for it I took a look at it before handing it off to Virgil. Virgil, of course, tapped his foot impatiently.

<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">CLASS OF SERVICE</td></tr> <tr><td>Class A Good</td></tr> <tr><td>Class B Fair</td></tr> <tr><td>Class C Poor</td></tr> </table>	CLASS OF SERVICE	Class A Good	Class B Fair	Class C Poor	 Tarant Union Telegraph	<table border="1" style="width: 100%; border-collapse: collapse;"> <tr><td style="text-align: center;">SYMBOLS</td></tr> <tr><td>ST-Stop</td></tr> <tr><td>ET-End</td></tr> <tr><td>NR-No Response</td></tr> </table>	SYMBOLS	ST-Stop	ET-End	NR-No Response
CLASS OF SERVICE										
Class A Good										
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SYMBOLS										
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NO RESPONSIBILITY is assumed by this Company, beyond the exercise of due diligence and good faith in the transmission of messages, for their loss										
I have discovered something interesting concerning our "friends" with the strange amulets. STOP I am off to investigate my theories regarding them, please accept my humblest apologies on my inability to meet with you in Tarant. STOP I understand all of this must be a bit disconcerting, for both of you. If you've questions concerning the Panarii religion, stop by any temple and speak with a priest. STOP I believe there is one in Tarant on the northern end of Lion's Head Circle. STOP When you have the means, travel to the village of Stillwater. STOP I will leave word with the InnKeeper at the Bleeding Rose Inn as to where you can find me. STOP Joachim STOP										

It was indeed bad news for Virgil, though I secretly celebrated. It was another golden opportunity to put off meeting Joachim for as long as possible. *Stillwater? Why that's even more out of the way than Shrouded Hills!* The longer I went without getting unceremoniously dismembered by religious fanatics the better.

"The telegram sent by Elder Joachim... I don't know what to make of it. It seems that he thinks it very important to find out why these men are trying to kill you... much more important than being here to protect you..."

I patted the dagger on my belt, thinking back to my training with Mr. Ogg not long ago. "I don't need protection..." I gave him a sly wink. Virgil throws up his hands.

"Oh, that's just bloody wonderful! Then maybe I'll just go home and leave you to get your skull smashed by..."

He takes a deep breath, steadying himself.

"Listen, I don't understand this any more than you do. Not long ago I'd have had a good belly laugh over the whole thing."

He looks at me questioning.

"What do YOU think?"

I didn't mean it like that. You don't have to be so bloody sensitive. I could tell that Joachim's behavior was beginning to irritate Virgil, but I didn't like that Virgil saw fit to take it out on me. I was admittedly angry, and I simply blurted out what I'd been thinking with no thought to the consequences. "I'm no religious fanatic. I think the whole story is a bit contrived..." Well... the cat's out of the bag now. This is going to go over like a lead balloon.

He looks at me almost angrily.

"So you think I'm a religious fool? You think all of this is just coincidence? Perhaps a big misunderstanding? Why don't you just go ahead and tell that to the next man that comes to cut your bloody throat? Want to know what I think? I'd say there's nothing more contrived than a dead fool..."

I sighed deeply. Getting angry at Virgil wasn't going to get anywhere, and arguing in front of Jayna and the telegraph operator seemed both rude and silly. As much as I wanted him to drop all of the religious nonsense, it made about as much sense for him to do so as it made sense for me to stop acting like a bloody thief. I felt bad, and I realized that I ought to have tried to be just as much of a friend to him as he tried to be to me. "Virgil, let's not argue about this. Let's look into the ring..."

Virgil studies me for a moment, then nods his head.

"Yes... there is particular wisdom in your words."

He laughs.

"And crying about this prophecy gibberish isn't going to keep a knife out of your ribs. I'll shut up for a while, and we'll concentrate on that ring. If we find the owner, maybe we'll find out why those bloody assassins want it so badly."

"That sounds fine, Virgil..." *I'll make it up to you. While we're in town we'll swing by that Panarii temple Joachim mentioned. I'll even take a bloody pamphlet.*

"Alright."

He seems relieved.

"Listen, Tarant is a big city, and a man needs to watch what he does and who he talks to. Believe me, I know a lot about surviving in places like this. This, and worse. Just keep one eye always open, and one hand always on your weapon. You can't trust strangers, and sometimes not even your friends. I used to, uh..."

I know, Virgil. We both know. When are we going to be able to talk about it? "Sounds like you know a lot about surviving in the streets..."

"I used to... well... that was another time."

He looks down.

"I, uh, know my way around. Just be on your guard, and I'll be watching out for you as well..."

Please... don't back out on me now. "Virgil... what is it? Where do you come from?" My motives were perhaps selfish, but certainly not ingenuine. I was actually starting to trust Virgil and I wanted him to trust me as well. I wanted so badly to talk about what I'd done, what I'd run away from... only I had nobody to talk to.

"No! I don't want to talk about it!"

He shakes his head.

"I'm sorry, I don't mean to... there's so much I have to learn. Joachim says the free man is defined by what he does today. I'll look no more into the past."

I could understand that outlook. It's the same outlook I had when I first met Virgil, but more and more I found myself thinking about the past and comparing it to the present. *You may not be shackled by it, but neither can you run from it... I'm half a continent away and I feel worse than I did before I left.* "I see. Let's go, Virgil."

Virgil could hear the sadness in my voice. "Yes. Let's, uh... let's keep moving forward..." Now wasn't the time to dwell on all of this anyway. This was Tarant, there was plenty to be done. *I didn't make that shopping list for nothing.* We wandered back out into the street and began browsing the shops in more detail. I'd only gotten through a couple of them, more concretely noting a few things I wanted and even a couple parts that seemed interesting to tinker with, when a man suddenly started shouting at me.

"Why, you're that woman from the newspaper! You survived that horrendous crash!"

Damnation! I never should've let Mr. Wright take that photo! "Uh... No. You must be mistaken." Jayna was biting her lip nervously, and Virgil was glaring at me. *Just because you two know I'm lying doesn't mean he does.*

The man looked very embarrassed all of the sudden. "Oh... I beg your

pardon, madam. You look remarkably like the photo in the paper." I quickly headed in the opposite direction, perhaps a bit too quickly. I was so busy searching the streets with my eyes, looking for anybody that might've overheard, that I failed to notice what was directly in front of me.

No sooner had I reached the next street than I quite literally tripped over a man on his hands and knees right in the middle of the road, staring down a sewer grate. I picked myself up off the ground angrily and shouted at him. "What in... who the hell are you?!"

The man is looking at a sewer grating directly in front of him.

"Yes, of course. Nice to meet you..."

"A pleasure." My sarcasm seemed lost on him. "What are you doing here out on the street?" He had to know he was making quite the nuisance of himself. I was still nervously glaring about, looking for potential assassins, but I seemed safe for the time being.

"Oh, bloody bother! I woke up this morning to use the loo. So I'm washing my hands and my wedding ring falls off! Right down the sink and disappears!"

"That's a shame..." I was mentally laughing at him, but I tried to sound sympathetic. Aside from just being polite I was actually hoping he'd offer me some money to retrieve it. Picking out so many things I'd wanted to buy had focused my mind quite directly on money and how I could get more of it. Everything was beginning to look like an opportunity. *Sewers aren't so bad. I've slept in worse.*

"And I went out with the lads last night... we had a few pints too many, and I didn't get home until late. So! You know what the wife is going to do! I thought I might go down into the sewers and see if I could find it, but I hear dreadful things about them."

Oho, yes, this is definitely worth a few coins. "Perhaps I might be of assistance?"

He glanced me up and down quite surprised, "Would you...? I'd be so appreciative. I don't at all savor the thought of tramping around in the sewers, mussing up my shoes. If you were to go down there and find the ring for me, I'd pay you 150 gold pieces!"

Shoes? You lost your wedding ring and you're concerned about shoes? If Jayna weren't here your pockets would already be empty just for being

such a snob. "Done" I hopped on into the sewers without hesitation. They really didn't bother me... much.

Rank didn't even begin to describe them. Poor Jayna looked like she was about to retch. *We'll be out of here in no time, dear girl. At least I'm not robbing the poor sod.* We trodded carefully through the shallow, murky waters dispatching overgrown rats as much because they were aggressive as because of the olfactory offenses committed against us.

After passing by a few passageways I stumbled across a couple thieves chatting with each other about the proceeds they'd just acquired from their latest victim. "Good day, friends!" I called out. I was hoping to ask them about the local guild, den, or whatever else they were calling it in Tarant these days. Unfortunately for me they mistook my shout as an act of aggression and attacked.

It was quite sudden, but my reflexes took over. One of the men lunged at me clumsily. I flipped my dagger out at just the right angle, knocking his weapon out of his hand. He stumbled backwards a bit, put off by my skill with a blade. I dashed around his partner and brought him to his knees with one good stab, kicking him off of the blade to free it that much quicker. The first man advanced on me again, but I was far faster and more experienced. Much like his friend he was already face down in the sewer water, blood trickling out of a lethal wound in his back.

On the plus side, his armor is rather snug. Beats ruining my poor old dress even more than I already have, and I can always sew up the hole in the back later. Jayna was staring at me in shocked horror, but Virgil gently grabbed her by the shoulders and pushed her on. She'd get over it... at least I hoped.

It wasn't long after our rather violent encounter with overly aggressive thieves that I managed to spot the ring sitting up against a wall in the far corner of the sewers. It was probably the dim lighting and being covered with a mixture of urine and god knows what else, but it really didn't look all that impressive. I wasn't even certain it was the right ring.

I slipped my dress back on before heading out of the sewers, making

sure to always be at my best appearance when dealing with other people. *I will be taking another bath tonight.* "Matthew! I found your ring," I held it out in the palm of my hand so he could get a good look at it. Then I snapped my hand shut and drew it back towards me, "Unfortunately, I think I'm going to keep it..." *I don't really want your smelly old ring, but you're filthy rich... share the wealth!* "What? My wife gave me that! It belongs to me, madam! I'm prepared to do whatever is necessary to get it back from you!" He clenches his fists.

So even after all the nasty things you've heard about the sewers, you'd rather things come down to fisticuffs - with a woman, no less - than to part with another 50 coins? Cheap is too good of a word for you. "I was only joking, old boy! Here's the ring!" I tossed it at him disgustedly. "Wonderful! Here's your money. You've really done me a favor here. Looks like I won't be sleeping on the porch..."

Right, whatever. Enjoy the married life. "I must go. Good day to you." I was angry and disgusted, not wanting to stomach the man's presence for any longer than I had to. After my trip through the sewers I had a feeling that most upstanding Tarantians would feel the same way about me. I would have taken a bath immediately, but I really needed to get as much done as quickly as possible with what the innkeeper was charging me. She'd get suspicious if I pickpocketed her a second time. No, my bath would have to wait until most places of business had closed for the evening.

Jayna tugged on my sleeve as we headed towards the university district. "Madam, don't you think that joke was a bit mean...?" She almost seemed to have forgotten what happened in the sewers, or at least come to terms with it. *You have got to stop following me, dear girl. I'm not a good influence.*

"Mean? Do you really think his ring just fell off during the morning wash up?" I suppose I could've said it a bit nicer, or just let her think I was a cruel wench instead of pointing out what I thought would've been obvious. It was endearing the way she trusted people.

She frowned and stared down at the ground, "Oh..."

Chapter the Fourteenth: The Pursuit of Modern Academics

My first stop in the university district, aside from the previous night's visit to the zoological society, was the Tarant library. I enjoyed reading immensely and I was hoping to take out a good book to read in the bath later (carefully, of course). I nearly fell to the ground and wept tears of precious joy when I entered. The sight of all those books...

"Greetings. Allow me to welcome you to the Library of Tarant. Could I interest you in becoming one of our members?"

Of course they needed my address and such so they could track down any books that didn't find their way back. I doubted I'd have a problem making up something convincing. The books might have a few problems finding their way back, however. "Membership?" He launched into a memorized pitch about how wonderful their books were and how valuable such a membership would be for somebody like me. *Yes, yes, I know all that. Get to the point.*

"This is the Great Library of Tarant. It was created years ago when the King chose to make his extensive library available to the public." I did read about Tarant having a King at one point, but I knew in the present day it was controlled by the Gnomish Industrial Council. In fact, if my memory served me well enough, the King's old castle was now the home to Tarant's foremost industrialist. "King? Tarant has a king?" Just because I'd read about it didn't mean I was against hearing it straight from one of Tarant's more intellectual citizens. I liked hearing about things from many different points of view.

"Tarant no longer has a king. The tale is a heartbreaking one. Some would say that when technology came into power, it was the King's desire to industrialize Tarant slowly. Others thought the King was holding technology back from the people. Though the kingdom was thriving, the royal court was in turmoil."

Can't disagree with the old chap. That's the approach King Farad took as

well, and it worked wonders for Caladon. "Go on."

"One day the King was found dead. The Queen and the Prince were missing. Having no heirs, the royal court was disbanded and the Gnomish Merchants Guild took control."

How delightfully conspiratorial. As interesting as the story had been, I still didn't have a bloody clue what I had to do to get a membership. "Very intriguing story... now tell me about the membership." You've got books, and I want them.

"A lifetime membership costs a mere 1,500 coins."

Bloody hell! I can't very well pickpocket books... or can I? My shopping list was growing prohibitively expensive. "I... uh... I'll return later, good sir. Thank you for your time." I wanted to believe that I could buy the whole damn library for 1500 coins, but there really were an awful lot of books in there. I scowled as I left the library, heading over in the direction of the university while I was in the area. There were bound to be any number of fascinating subjects for study there, and I definitely wanted to take part.

As I entered it was impossible not to notice the peculiar looking gnome sitting in the entryway, obviously deep in thought. I didn't see anybody else around so I thought I'd get acquainted. "Hello, sir. Might I ask who you are?"

"I am Benjamin Gershwin, doctor of Phrenology. How can I be of service?"

"Nice to meet you, Benjamin. Did you say phrenology?" *Oh lord, that's where mindless quacks try to tell your future by feeling up your skull. They're perverse deviants if you ask me.*

"Phrenology? It's a science of the head. You see, every man and woman's head is characterized by different bumps and ridges. Through studying these, I attempt to extrapolate the personality of the individual involved. It's dreadfully interesting and phenomenally accurate..."

"Hmmm. Will you read MY head?" *He's got no idea that I've been romping around in the sewers. This ought to be good for a laugh.*

"Surely!" He announced proudly, "Here, if you'll just lower your head, and turn to the right..." *Watch where those hands stray, gnome.* I felt surprisingly uncomfortable at the obvious pleasure the gnome took in

feeling up my head. *Ugh... just stop already.*

"Ah, quite interesting! I would surmise, unquestionably, that you are indeed a nomad..."

Jayna actually had to excuse herself so she wouldn't burst out laughing in front of the bastard. Virgil and myself could properly hold back until later. "Your powers amaze me, Benjamin..."

He bowed, and I stepped back a little bit lest he try to look at or grab anything. I didn't trust him one damned bit. "Yes, yes I know. But remember, it's not me, it's science! And phrenology is the science of the future..."

It won't be once the rest of the population figures out it's a science of damned perverts. "Of course. What are you currently working on?"

Jayna finally got all the laughter out of her system and returned, though she still let out the occasional snort.

"It's interesting that you ask... I'm looking to acquire the skulls of Jin and Xin, the famous Renar Siamese twins, for my studies. They were elvish debutantes who were joined at the hip their whole lives! Scandalous characters as well... stories of their exploits still float around the elite Tarantian social circles..."

I knew it. He's a damned pervert. Nevertheless, I was interested in what he had to say. I'd read about the twins, of course, and he wasn't entirely inaccurate in his assessment of them. I thought about tracking the skulls down as a possible decoration for Frederick's study. He did so appreciate such pieces of history. "Acquire them? Where can these skulls be found?"

"Well, that's going to be a bit of a problem. Perhaps you could help me with it? They are interred in a mausoleum in the Tarant cemetery. I'll pay you gold pieces for your trouble..."

Hmm... that sounds a bit damning. "Wait. You want me to rob a grave for you?" *Then again, I'm already damned anyway.*

"All in the interest of science, miss, all in the interest of science. Just think about the advances that could be made from just this one little indiscretion."

Advances, yes... my purse is rather behind the times and could use some modern advancement, thank you very much. "Well, since you phrase it

so eloquently... I'll do it."

Benjamin was getting far too excited, so I beat a hasty retreat. "The information in these skulls might very well unlock the final phrenological secrets... help us to gain insight into the workings of the human mind!" *That doesn't change the fact that you're still a damned pervert.* I ducked into the hallway in order to further explore the university.

I stumbled into the university bookstore and nearly wept again for the second time that day. It was filled with books, but not just any kinds of books: it was filled with technological manuals. I excitedly skipped over to the salesman at the far end of the room, my eyes wide with joy. "Do tell me about your manuals, good sir!"

"The manuals that we sell are very helpful in learning general knowledge about a particular technological discipline. If you find yourself spending most of your time studying electricity, but are interested in learning a little something about chemistry, then the chemistry manual will give you a little added expertise without having to commit to a full degree in chemistry."

Yes, I must have them! Every last one! I tried not to let my excitement show, mostly because it would've been childish and I didn't want to give the wrong impression. Beneath the surface, however, I wanted to scream out of sheer excitement. "Hmmm. I think I'd like to purchase some technical manuals..."

"The price is 750 coins per manual. Do you have enough money?" My heart sank. *I want it... even at that price I still want it.* While I could've spent the money it would've been a substantial portion of what I had for merely a single book, and that one book would cost me half of what a membership to the library would cost. If it came down to a decision between two manuals or an entire library of reading material, I'd naturally have to go for the latter. Until I got some more money it just wasn't worth it, no matter how badly I wanted them. "Yes... but I don't believe I can afford to part with that kind of money just yet. I will return, I assure you."

Sullen, I wandered out of the room. The university was small and there was only one remaining room that I hadn't visited yet, so I peeked my head in curiously. Inside was a spindly looking elf with

his face buried in a tome, a sign I took to mean I'd get along with the fellow just fine. "Greetings, sir. Might I ask who you are?"

"I am Professor Aldous Buxington, and I am the head of the Religion department here at Tarant University. And you are?"

The last time little Steven teased me he got thrown quite roughly to the ground. Merle made me wash dishes for the whole orphanage that entire week as punishment, but Steven never teased me again. I stole Merle's silver necklace for revenge and sold it to the general store the next day. "I am Samantha Colburn. Might I ask what exactly it is you do here?" Now that I thought about it, the man's name sounded somewhat familiar.

He seemed surprised at my interest, as did Virgil. *Just because I hate practicing religion doesn't mean I can't enjoy studying it.* "Me? Oh, I've been here at Tarant University for many years. Mostly I teach classes, but I still do a fair bit of research when I can find the time..."

My hunch was correct: the elf and I were going to get along just fine. I wandered over to his desk and sat down in a nearby chair, making myself comfortable. He didn't seem to mind the company in the slightest. "What sort of research are you doing right now?"

"Currently, I am studying the old pagan religions of Arcanum. As I'm sure you're aware, the Panarii have been the favored religion in Arcanum for the last several hundred years, but in the years before the Age of Legends, there were many religions and many gods. Each of the races had certain gods that they prayed to, and those gods are what I've been studying..."

"I see. Could I ask you a few questions about the pagan religions?" I finally realized exactly what had seemed familiar about the man. I'd read his book! Frederick had a copy of it in his study and I found it a fascinating read. Ancient and vengeful gods made for the best stories.

He actually smiled at my interest and seemed more than happy to chat as long as I wished. "Of course, ask whatever you like."

I very nearly shouted at him, "Professor Buxington... are you the author of 'Pagan Gods of Arcanum'?"

Satisfaction at my recognizing him turned his gentle smile into a full out grin. "Yes, yes I am. Would you like a copy?"

"Absolutely!" I shouted excitedly. "I mean, I've read it... but I no longer have access to the... uh... library where it once was. I'd love to take the time to read it again."

"It's not a problem," he assured me as pulled a book out of his desk drawer and handed it to me, "Here you go. So you say you read it already? Did you like it?"

Well, actually I like most books. Though I am starting to like to chat with people about various things as well... "Oh, I found it fascinating really. Say, do you know if there are still temples to the pagan gods around? Your book never quite covered the subject, and I'm finding myself doing quite a bit of traveling these days. I'd love to pay them a visit if I can."

"Yes. There are still individuals who worship them as well... both the Order of Halcyon and the cult of Geshtianna are examples. Most of the ancient pagan temples are in ruins now. But you can still find them, scattered throughout Arcanum, and some still have their altars intact..."

I started to grow increasingly excited. It was one thing to talk with an average person and hear their take on things, but chatting with an expert about the subject with which he is most familiar was a rare treat indeed. Doctor Gershwin didn't count. "That's wonderful, really! I would be very appreciative if you could write down their locations for me. I'm afraid I haven't had nearly the chance to study these things as you have, but perhaps experiencing them firsthand will partially make up for it."

He pulled out a pad of paper from a desk drawer and tore a sheet off of it, scratching rough directions on it with a pen. "This ought to aid you in your pilgrimage, then. You also might want to take a look at that diagram I have on the wall there. We call it Mazzerin's Mystery." "Mazzerin was an elven mystic who did his share of research into the old religions. About 500 years ago, he wrote 'The Book of the Twelve Powers,' which was a fairly cryptic analysis of the pagan religions. According to Mazzerin, there was some sort of a deeper connection between all of them..."

He had really piqued my interest now. "What do you mean, 'deeper connection'?" The way he talked about it suggested a degree of

uncertainty that only made me all the more excited. If even he were unsure of something then I would be thrilled to investigate it.

"Well, Mazzerin believed the gods and their powers were somehow interwoven, and this diagram is supposed to explain how they are related. Certain gods don't get along with other gods, so-and-so begat so-and-so, get blessed by this fellow and that fellow curses you. That sort of thing..."

Come now, why so unsure of yourself? Speak in specifics already! Either that or admit you can't so I can figure this thing out. "I'm absolutely fascinated by all this. Do you think you might be able to explain the diagram to me?"

He cleared his throat, "Well, I'm not so sure. There is an excerpt from the 'Book of Twelve Powers' that might help to explain what it means, but no one has ever been able to solve Mazzerin's Mystery."

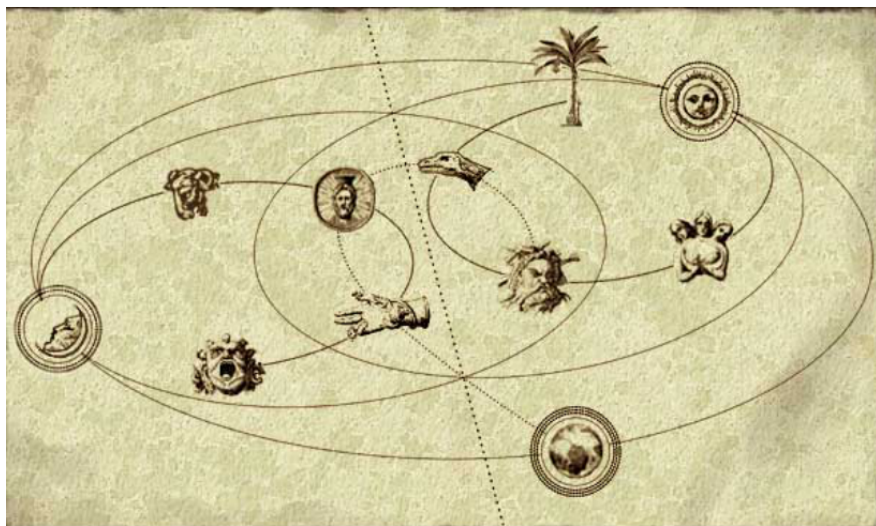
Yes! It's remained unsolved! A true, intellectual mystery. Although I was interested for my own reasons, in the back of my mind I also thought that this would make another fine story to tell Frederick upon my return. "Well, what about the excerpt?"

He opened a copy of his book that was sitting out on his desk and flipped to the very back, reading aloud from it, "...and the twelve powers, they are woven together, flowing inward. The road to truth starts with wisdom, but shadow first finds purchase in the heart. The road between them is marked with stones.

"And the gods, they are jealous gods, and often despise one another. Greed is spit upon by love without the protection of the shadow, and this serves as a reflection of the whole.

"Be steadfast. Four powers and then a fifth. Three fives and then the one. And glory to he who gains the blessing of the All-father, who will become as a god himself..." He looked up at me expectantly, shutting the book and setting it back down upon his desk.

"Let's look at the diagram." I said.



"The road to truth starts with Wisdom... that would have to refer to Terel, the elven god of wisdom. His symbol is that tree on the right, is it not?"

He nodded, pointing to the symbols along the counterclockwise line that connected them, "Yes, and that's Makaal, Alberich, Geshtianna, and finally Halcyon."

"...but shadow first finds purchase in the heart. The road between them is marked with stones.' Moorindal, god of shadow, is on the left there... and there is a dotted line between him and the 'road starting with wisdom'. Do you think those could be the stones the passage refers to?"

He thought about it for a moment before responding, "Perhaps. Are you thinking of making a pilgrimage to the darker gods, then?"

"Not just the darker gods. 'Four powers and then a fifth. Three fives and then the one'... if you look at the diagram that could refer to the three sets of five gods all connected by the circular lines. Each involves four lesser gods and then a greater god. The one must obviously refer to Velorien."

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "I think I see it now! So you think to visit the gods on the right starting with Terel, then the gods on the left starting with Torg. Finally, you'll visit the gods of the third circle starting with Alberich. After visiting Kaitan, you'd seek out the lost altar of Velorien."

"Precisely!" I shouted, "Do you think that's it? That's the mystery?"

He stared at the diagram for a bit longer before turning to answer me, "Your guess is as good as mine at this point. It's certainly a sensible way to interpret this diagram, though I can think of others as well. I certainly won't stop you if you wish to try it, and I'd love to hear about anything you might find. It's a lot of time to dedicate to a theory that doesn't seem to explain all of the lines in the excerpt, however."

"I'll do it. It looks like my business is taking me traveling quite a ways anyway, I can indulge my intellectual curiosities with a few detours here and there, can I not?" Virgil sighed.

The professor sat back down at his desk and began flipping through his book again idly. "I wish you luck in your travels then, madam. Do let me know if you find anything interesting. Especially if you were to locate the altar of Velorien as you seem to have planned. I've not

had the pleasure of studying it."

"Of course, my good man!" I clapped him on the shoulder gently and strode out of the university, glancing at the sheet of notes the professor wrote for me. "Say, Virgil, if we do end up in Stillwater you can visit Joachim and I can visit Geshtianna. Deal?"

He groaned, "I suppose that does sound fair."

"Splendid! Now, let's get back to the inn for some rest." I was so excited thinking about the pagan gods that I didn't even notice I was wandering straight through the middle of a pack of orcish thugs. I was quite startled when the apparent leader of the brutes started speaking to me.

"Hey, what? It's a pasty-faced human harlot thinking she can just waltz right through our section of town without paying the piper. Cough up 10 coins, you boring sod!"

Harlot?! Those are some bold words for an orc. Don't think I'll feel the slightest bit sorry for stabbing you. "And if I don't?" I was actually a bit afraid of what might happen, but I refused to show weakness of any kind, and a part of me was petty enough to want revenge for his insulting me. It struck me as strange that I would've actually considered paying him if he'd asked politely, though perhaps I was expecting too much from an orc.

He steps closer to me, menacingly.

"Then you'll taste the edge of my blade, tramp!"

Now that bloody does it. I laughed nervously, "Ah, well, I'd love to pay but I'm afraid I'm a bit short at the moment..." My hand was already pulling a stun grenade out of my purse.

The thug shouted, "Then I'll take whatever you got from your corpse!" and leapt at me but I was already prepared. I lit the fuse on the grenade and dropped it, quickly diving out of the way as the thugs converged on where I'd just been. It took only a second for the hiss and bright flash of light to follow. The thugs stumbled around in a daze, unaware of what exactly I'd just done to them.

I didn't know how long their confusion would last and I didn't want

to chance them running us down and stabbing one of us in the back. Especially not if poor Jayna fell behind.... *I'm sorry you have to see this, dear girl, but it's better than you getting hurt.*

I whirled around that alleyway like a ballet dancer... if ballet dancers carried knives and stabbed orcish thugs in the backs with them. It may have been unnecessarily brutal, but I just couldn't take the chance. In my anger I was vicious and merciless, stabbing them far more brutally than I'd ever stabbed anyone before. I severed muscles and splintered bone, crippling the beasts far before I had the decency to finish them off. *If any one of you dares lay a finger on that girl the pain you feel now will seem like a a massage by comparison to what I'll do to you then.*

None of them were even able to move. Before they regained sight and senses their hands were already no longer capable of holding weapons, and walking would've been quite a challenge as well. Pockets of blood nearly exploded as I plunged my blade in for the kill. Jayna squealed and buried her face in Virgil's robe when the orcish corpses began falling to the ground with wet thuds. Virgil didn't even lift a finger to help. He saw the look in my eyes and merely held Jayna, trying his best to shield her from the violence.

He walked ahead, taking her with him. I did my best to clean off the worst of the blood, but I was headed for the bath anyway and I knew the rest of it would wash off long before the smell of the sewers did. When I felt I was at least somewhat less horrifying I caught up to the two of them. I wanted to apologize, but I had no idea how to even say it. *So sorry, if I didn't rip their entrails out and splatter them on the pavement they just might've done something drastic!* I simply kept silent, letting Virgil continue to shield her from my gruesome visage. Eventually I walked ahead, and I was already in the bath even before the other two arrived back at the inn. *You can't stay with me, Jayna. This is just going to keep happening. No matter what you think, I'm not a good person.*

Chapter the Fifteenth: Gender Inequality Rears Its Ugly Head

Jayna seemed to be in much better spirits in the morning, which I almost regretted. She very obviously intended to continue following me and I really didn't know what to do about it. *Come now, there's plenty of room for another student at the university... or you could apprentice yourself to the herbalist at the technologist's shop... really, there's far more opportunity for you away from me than there is with me. Please...*

I decided to spend the early morning wandering all about Tarant, giving Jayna a good look at the place. I very explicitly pointed out places where she could go to feel comfortable and learn more about her trade, but my meaning went right past her. Even Virgil started trying to help me out, pointing out with mock excitement how wonderful it would be to study at the university. It was fruitless, however. The dear girl was just so damned clueless.

We happened to be strolling through the park, pointing out all the wonderful flowers and marveling at how peaceful it all was, when a jovial sounding half orc just walked right up to me and began chatting away.

"Hello, missus! I go by the name of Thom Grak. Say, you wouldn't happen to know a fellow name of de Cesare?"

Nothing like the morning crazy at the park. "Oh, uh, yes, I have had the pleasure of knowing him." *Please go away.*

"Ha! Liar! Pulling old Thom's leg! I like you, miss! I know you're lying about knowing him, as no one would refer to meeting him as a pleasure! Well, if you happen to see him, could you tell him to get his bum over to the Subterranean kiosk on the Kensington Broadway? He was meant to have met me here over an hour ago."

Why, certainly. If I randomly bump into this man I never met... just who the hell do you think you are? I played along with his little game, hoping that if I pretended to acquiesce he would leave me alone. Polite lies were a specialty of mine. "Any idea as to where this fellow might be?"

The half orc snickered a bit, "Most likely at the bottom of a bottle somewhere, unless I miss my guess."

"I'll let him know you're looking for him if I see him." *Not that I'm going to bother looking for him in the first place.*

"Thank you much, madam," he smiled at me as I turned and brushed past. *Glad that's over with.* After the long morning I decided to temporarily giving up on convincing Jayna to stop following me. I thought that maybe I just needed to give her time for everything to sink in and then she'd wander off of her own accord. I had work to get to, anyway. Those Siamese twin skulls that Doctor Gershwin was interested in certainly weren't going to unearth themselves.

The cemetery was located in the Southwest corner of town, patrolled only by a single guard whose job it was to make sure nobody interfered with the graves or coffins. *It'll take more than that to stop me.* I crept over to a nearby building paying careful attention to avoid the notice of the guard. The sign on the outside read, "Beloved Twins, Jin and Xin Ren'ar," so I was fairly certain I was on the right track. The lock on it was missing completely and it appeared to have been pried open sometime recently. Undaunted, I headed inside and took just a little peek inside the coffin, hoping I would find the skulls straight away.

Much to my surprise, the coffin was completely empty save for a matchbook advertising the Wellington Gentleman's Club. *Now that is one funny place to leave a book of matches. I wonder if I'm being lead somewhere.* I wanted to ignore the matchbook for many reasons, not the least of which was that it was damned creepy, so I moved over to the only remaining building and hoped the Siamese twins would've been buried there. *It's not entirely irrational. Whoever put the matchbook there might've switched the signs.* I snuck into the other building easily, gently sliding the lock open with my pick. The guard

didn't seem to notice.

I was quite surprised upon opening the coffin to find it had no bottom. Instead a ladder lead beneath the ground and into a secret passage of some sort. It was then that I remembered the headline from the weathered old paper I'd read in Frederick's study, *Assassin Fails In Attempt On Tarant King's Life*. The article explained that the assassin likely broke in through a secret passage between the castle and the cemetery that had been built as a secret escape tunnel. They declared that the tunnel was to be sealed and filled with deadly traps to avoid such a thing from happening ever again. *I somehow doubt the skulls I'm looking for are down there.*

It seemed like my search for the Siamese twin skulls would bring me to the gentlemen's club, and I didn't like that idea one bit. Aside from it being a foul den of inequity, somebody had intentionally planted that matchbook after stealing the skulls themselves. Whoever it was wanted to leave a trail, and following it seemed like a horribly bad idea. *I wonder if it's possible to have curiosity surgically removed? That might be an operation worth looking into.*

The gentlemen's club was just next door to the cemetery so I didn't have far to walk. I brushed off the dirt that clung loosely to the bottom of my dress and headed over to it. As I tried to enter, however, the man at the door quite rudely grabbed my arm and gave me a hateful glare.

"Hello madam. May I help you?"

I grumbled at him and pulled my arm free. "Might I go in for a drink?" *...or do the lads fancy each other more than an attractive lady?*

"I'm sorry, madam. This is a gentlemen's club. No offense, but females are not allowed within."

Oh well that bloody figures. I suppose tomboys don't count then? I batted my eyelashes at him and looked up at him sweetly with wide eyes, "Is there no way I might be permitted to enter...?"

He gives me a haughty stare.

"I'm sorry, MADAM... this is a gentlemen's club, and it has long-standing rules concerning the... uh... fairer sex. Mr. Wendell Wellington established this club years ago, and if he says no women, then there will be no women allowed on my watch. I'm sorry, but

that's just the way it is."

Then there will have to be an exception. I'm entering that club. "I see. And just where might I find this Mr. Wellington?" A friendly chat with the owner seemed like one of the faster ways of getting in without having to break any laws. Not that lawbreaking itself bothered me, but I would quite easily be caught and that was a much greater cause for alarm.

"Hmm."

The bouncer looks at me incredulously.

"Madam! As if I would tell you where the honorable Mr. Wellington lives! Please, respect the man's wishes and his privacy... I must ask you to leave the premises..."

Do you really think I won't be able to find him just because you won't help me? Your prejudice is palpable, sir! Not all women are helpless. I stormed off, straight back to the university district. I thought I'd remembered seeing a building that billed itself as the 'hall of records' while I was strolling about there the other day. It didn't really interest me at the time, but now I was quite interested in any census records they might have inside. As luck would have it, the building was not just a part of my imagination.

The records office itself was located in the basement of the water works. I approached the counter and got the attention of the good woman behind it, "Good day, madam. Would it be possible for you to locate a person for me?"

"Yes, I would be delighted to do that for you. What is the name of the individual you are looking for?" Many names drifted across my mind then. I could ask her to find that Cesare fellow that Mr. Grak was looking for, though I didn't really care enough to. I might've asked her where Joachim was if I didn't think it would make Virgil mad, and I wasn't overly eager to find him either.

"Madam? Was there someone you wanted to find or not?"

I snapped out of my daze. "Wendell Wellington." She searched throughout several papers while I tapped my foot impatiently. *We'll see who has the last laugh.*

She looks through her records.

"Hmmm. Wendell Wellington... Wellington... Ah! Here we are! Mr.

Wellington lives here in Tarant. His address is 42 Vermillion Road..." That was decidedly easier than I'd expected it to be. I didn't even have to bribe the woman. "Thank you, madam. I must take my leave now." I had a rather self-satisfied smile plastered on my face as I climbed the stairs back up.

Mr. Wellington's residence was quite easy to find, being situated not far at all from Vermillion Station. Actually nearly any address along Vermillion Road was fairly easy to navigate to. It travelled the entire length of Tarant and had many noteworthy places along it, not the least of which being the train station or the inn.

I knocked on the door to Wellington's house and was admitted entry by a half ogre guard. *I'm sick and bloody tired of being scared of you things.* I resolved to pay it no mind. "Good evening, sir, are you Mr. Wendell Wellington?"

This rather greasy fellow grabs my hand and bows over it as he kisses it.

"I am pleased to make your acquaintance. Wendell Wellington."

Ugh. You have got to be kidding me. What a disgusting little gnome.

"Gentleman's club? Am I to assume women are not welcome?" He seemed to want to impress me so I thought that if I acted offended he might make an exception.

"Well, women are not generally permitted within its walls, but there are always exceptions, eh?"

He winks at me.

"I am fairly confident something could be arranged..."

Something tells me this is not the exception I was hoping for. "What did you have in mind?" *Please just say you'd like me to deliver a message, or fetch some item for you, or take your half ogre pet for a walk... anything like that..*

"A mere pittance, say 200 coins, ought to gain you an invitation, which will get you into..."

He takes my hand suggestively.

"... and of course I would expect you to, uh, show me your appreciation..."

Nothing brought out the worst in me quite like lechery. I smiled at him and tilted my head, gently and quietly withdrawing my dagger

from my belt. I held it up to his fat, greasy neck, "What if I allow you to live, instead of ripping your throat out?" Jayna squeaked. *Erk... I almost forgot she was still here.*

"Egads! I have never heard such talk from a woman! You cannot be serious, madam..."

He sees from the look in my eye me are indeed serious.

"What... heh... it was merely an invitation with my blessing."

He hands me the invitation and then takes out a handkerchief and wipes his brow.

The half ogre didn't even make a single move. *Are all of those things that bloody useless? Maybe this is one of those decorative half ogres.*

"Pleasure doing business with you. Good day, sir."



With that nasty bit of business taken care of it was time to continue on my hunt for the elusive skulls. I had already done far too much work for a measly 100 coins and a souvenir, but on the other hand I was glad for the opportunity to knock Mr. Wellington and his pompous patrons down a few notches.

Chapter the Sixteenth: Not So Gentle Woman

I strolled up to the entrance of the Gentleman's Club confidently, perhaps arrogantly. "Good day, sir. I think I'll be going in for a drink." He glared at me, recognizing me, but he repeated his memorized line nonetheless.

"I'm sorry, madam. This is a gentlemen's club. No offense, but females are not allowed within."

Pulling the slip of paper out of my pocket, I handed it to him, "Oh, but that doesn't apply to me. I've been given this special invitation, sir... from Mr. Wellington himself." I couldn't help but smile. Anybody that knew what I was like when I was younger wouldn't have been surprised in the slightest. Some things never changed.

You can see he's not happy about it.

"I see. Well, madam, I can't stop you from going in. But this is highly irregular. I'm afraid the regular members won't be at all pleased. I beg you... finish your business here and leave as quickly as possible." He opens the door for me.

The less pleased they are the more pleased I am. I think I'll languish here a while. "Good day to you." I blew him a kiss as I wandered past, which only seemed to enrage him further. That had been entirely the point.

All eyes were on me the moment I entered the club. The bartender kept his calm, and a particularly drunk patron next to him didn't seem in a mind to care, but the rest of them simply couldn't stop staring. One dwarven gentleman wearing a darling little suit coat tossed his paper on the nearby table and got up from his seat on the sofa. "This is an outrage! I say good day to you, MADAM." He stormed out. *Why, this is fast becoming my favorite place for a drink in all Tarant. I do think I'll be coming back quite regularly.*

I took the dwarf's seat and picked up the paper casually, keeping

myself occupied by reading it until the club patrons mostly stopped staring at me. I preferred to be discreet and that was quite difficult when I'd just garnered myself so much attention.

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THIEVES STILL AT LARGE

Late on Tuesday evening, the mansion of Mr. James and Mrs. Evelyn Garringsburg, at 37 Devonshire Way, was broken into by thieves and ransacked, according to sources close to the family. Among the many items stolen was the famed 'Kerghan and Persephone', painted by Pizarro. Sold

last year at Rensud's for a reputed 50,000 gold pieces, the painting was the show piece of the Garringsburg gallery.

Mr. Garringsburg, a long-standing member of the Wellington Gentlemen's Club, had this to say—"You can be assured that the perpetrators of this heinous crime will be brought to justice, and that reparations will be made." Mrs. Garringsburg was unavailable for comment. The Garringsburgs have

offered a 300 gold piece reward. This crime is only the latest of many art-related robberies, which have included the "Lorek in repose" statue, and the Blendom Vase.

WEATHER

The Meteorological Service Bureau of Tarant is Predicting sunny weather for the next Two to Three days, with an increasing Chance of Precipitation before the Passage of a Fortnight.

TAX INCREASE

The Parliament is again

considering Raising the Levy of Incomes in Tarant by another 2 coins for every 100 earned. The Speaker has refuted all Public Criticism of the Increase, by Citing the importance of Public Works projects currently underway.

**PUBLIC SERVICE
ANNOUNCEMENT**

There will be a City Council meeting this Friday which is Open to the Public. The Meeting will commence sharply at 7pm.

EDITORIAL REMINDER

The Tarantian would like to

A 300 coin reward was too good to pass up. Aside from just that, if I tracked the painting down I was sure to catch the eye of the local thieves guild. Joining up with them could prove incredibly profitable. I made a mental note to visit the Garringsburg residence when I

finished harrassing the 'gentlemen' around me. After I'd finished reading the cover story most people had forgotten I was even there, or at least tried not to be too bothered by my presence. I got up to walk around and started chatting up the patrons, looking for any clues on the whereabouts of the skulls.

"Who is the King of Caladon?"

As if I didn't like this club enough already. Another 500 coins was a very welcome addition to my pocketbook, and I couldn't have earned it any easier.

Over at the back of the club an elven man shrouded deeply in a dark robe gazed out at the rest of the patrons nervously. There was something incredibly suspicious about his behavior and I was sure it had something to do with the skulls. I made sure nobody was looking as I approached him, but when I neared he quietly snapped at me.

"What could a human possibly want with me?"

His voice was gravelly and his tone hushed. He was definitely some kind of thief. *Why must thieves always draw attention to themselves by acting so damned suspicious? Gives the lot of us a bad name it does.*

"Greetings. Might I ask who you are, sir?"

The man before me is dressed in robes. He looks furtively back and forth, then regards me with hard, unblinking eyes.

"Better you don't ask questions like that. Likely to get a girl like you in a load of trouble."

This girl can take care of herself, thanks. "I appreciate the tip, friend." *Not really, but you have information I want and I'm going to pretend to like you until I get it.*

The man looks me over, calculating... he seems to come to a decision.

"Are you looking for work, friend? Are you a woman that can keep her mouth shut and make yourself a fortune?"

This was just the inroad I'd been looking for. Associating with the local thieves was a fast track to easy wealth. As long as I didn't get caught, anyway. "I'd appreciate the work... I'm new around here." I could tell this elf was small time, but I hoped his job would lead me higher up in the organization. It was then that I wondered if this was all an elaborate test, beginning from the moment Doctor Gershwinn had asked me to pilfer the skulls from the cemetery.

He comes closer, his features hardening.

"This is no cutpurse's jaunt, my friend. The job is not difficult, but the price for failure is death. Do we understand one another?"

Men like this were regular customers at this 'Gentlemen's Club' yet somehow an innocent, harmless woman like me had to get nasty to be admitted. *Well... maybe I'm not quite so innocent... or harmless. But the damned doorman hardly knew that! I ought to be insulted!* I was getting a bit too sidetracked, so I tried to keep my mind on the topic at hand. "Clearly... what is it I need to do?"

"Here's the word, friend. I have a sealed note. You're to take it from here directly to the address I give you. You are not to look at the note. We will know if you have, and that would be most unfortunate. You will be paid gold pieces for your trouble. No questions asked."

You just can't offer to give me a mysterious note that I'm not supposed to look at the contents of. Really, that kind of trust is horribly misplaced.

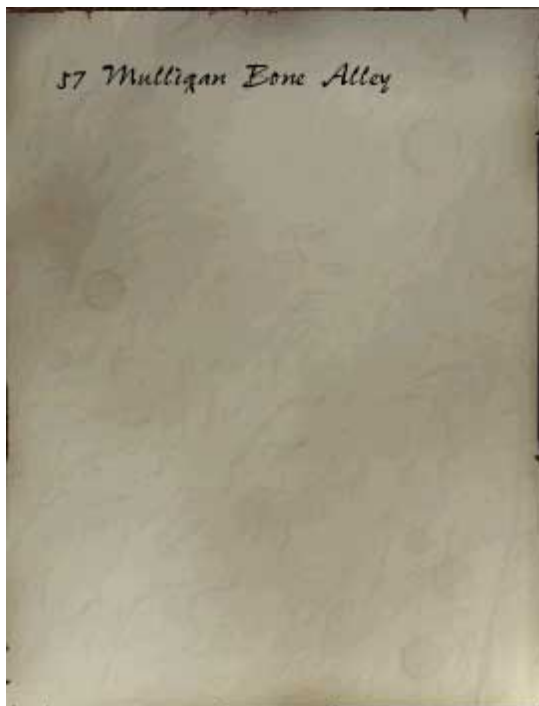
"I'm the woman for the job. Your secret's safe with me!" For some reason the more blatant my lies the more people tended to believe them. I took note of it.

"Very well."

He hands me the note.

"As I said, do not open the note. Deliver it to 12 Low Dervish Row and collect your money. I bid you good day."

"Good day to you." The man turned and walked out of the bar, his business concluded. *Pah, what a liar. They'll never be able to tell if I just take a quick peek.*



It amused me to think that the elf handed me the note honestly believing I wouldn't open it. It would take far more than empty threats to stop my curiosity. Since the contents of the note seemed to be an address I figured that was probably the location of the Siamese twin skulls. Since finding that out had been my reason for entering the club in the first place I decided it was time to relax.

"Hmm? What can I do for you?"

"Good day to you, bartender. I'd like a shot of whiskey, please."

"Certainly, sir." He paused for only a moment, "uh... I mean madam. Sorry, it's something of a habit."

He actually sounded relatively sincere, so I forgave him his transgression. My fondness for the club and rattling its members' cages had put me in a rather forgiving mood. "You can make it up to me by telling me what's happening around Tarant lately."

"Tarant is full of soothsayers trying to make a coin or two, but people say that Madame Toussaude can actually see the future!"

I looked over at Jayna, trying to be sociable. "Now that would be a

fascinating talent, wouldn't it? Getting my fortune told might be good for a laugh, eh?"

Jayna whined, "If you ask me, that kind of thing would make me nervous. If somebody really can tell my future, I don't want to know it." She had a point, but one that she could only arrive at if she first suspected anybody might actually have the ability to see the future. Her naivete made me sigh.

I ordered two more shots of whiskey and slid one over in front of her. She looked at it, then looked up at me with a rather confused expression as if to say 'you want ME to drink this?'. I continued chatting with the bartender, "Tarant's an awful big place. There's got to be more action than a couple phoney fortune tellers."
"Her establishment is down on the south side of town."

Ugh. No thanks. I'd have to be really, really desperate to go looking for that kind of work. "Sir, you forget yourself yet again."

He actually seemed truly embarrassed that time. "I do apologize once again, madam. I didn't mean to imply-"

"Think nothing of it, my good man. Just be quick with the information; what else goes on around here?"

"Have you met Mr. Cedric Appleby? Laughingstock of the city, he is. Couldn't make a steam engine to save his life!"

I shrugged, "Can anybody, really? Aside from Bates? Perhaps the man ought to be given credit for at least trying."

The bartender laughed and laughed, "I can see that you haven't met him, then. Perhaps you ought to pay him a visit when you're done getting your fortune told." The dear fellow was actually starting to grow on me. I wondered why he worked in a place like this, but then again Mr. Wellington probably paid top notch for a skilled bartender.

"That sounds like-" The drunk next to me fell off his stool, shoving me quite roughly as he fell and nearly knocking me to the ground. He grabbed hold of the bar and clung to it desperately to pull himself up. I couldn't help but stare.

The smell of alcohol coming from this fellow fairly gags me.

"What? What is it?"

He hiccup.

"Who you be?"

I wonder if this one is even aware that I'm a woman. "Who might you be?" This man was going to sleep like the dead tonight and a bit more searching at the hall of records could provide me with a rather lucrative opportunity for thievery.

He looks at me intently, unsuccessfully attempting to focus on me.

"Why, I am the honorable"

hic

"Sir Matt de Cesare, at your service."

That made sense. "I'm to deliver a message to you from Thom Grak." I may not have been looking to deliver that message, but then again I could probably squeeze some coins out of a job well done. It wasn't as though it really took any effort, I'd just found him by accident.

Matt looked quite confused. He picked up Jayna's shot of whiskey and tossed it down his throat. "What? Oh... uh... what does that old tosser want now?" The addition of even more alcohol into his already intoxicated body caused him to start hiccuping even worse than he already had been.

I sighed, looking away from him to lessen the smell of alcohol. Even I had my limits. "He said he's waiting at the Kensington Broadway kiosk for you."

"That he did, eh?"

He lurches forward and steadies himself at the last minute before falling on top of me.

"Stupid"

hic

"bourgeoisie businessman! Let him wait!"

Moderation, dear sir... moderation. "Well, my work is done. Good day." I was feeling pleasantly warm from the two drinks I'd tossed down myself, so I figured my business in the Gentlemen's Club was done... for a while, anyway.

A shout erupted from the far end of the room as a half orc thug drew a blade and ran towards the bar, "Finally, I get to kill de Cesare!"

Before I could draw my own dagger I was quite rudely shoved out of the way as Matt drew a pistol from beneath his coat. He fired a single shot, the bullet striking his assailant directly between the eyes. The half orcish body crumpled onto the ground, the blade clattering across the floor. A pool of blood began to slowly spread from where the body landed.

It becomes obvious that his drunkenness was a ruse as he quickly grabs me.

"Who are you?! Why did you lead him here to me? Talk quickly before I kill you!"

What the hell have I gotten myself into? "What? What are you talking about?" Virgil had his quarterstaff in his hand and he was eyeing Matt's pistol nervously. I could tell he wanted to help me, but wasn't sure if it would end disastrously.

"I've never seen Grak use women before... but you were working for him, weren't you?"

"N-no... absolutely not! I met him on the street. He asked me to do him a favor, that's it!" Matt's pistol lowered slightly and Virgil began to relax a bit as well. He gave me a rather apologetic stare, regretting that he hadn't been able to really do anything to protect me. *Don't worry about it, Virgil... this one's my own damned fault.*

He pauses for a moment, looking at me.

"I might be insane, but I believe you. Now get out of here before I change my mind."

He lets go of me.

If I couldn't resist the temptation of a simple note there was no way I'd pass this up. "Wait - what was all this about?" There was something going on and after being treated so rudely I at least deserved an answer.

He looks around.

"We can't talk here... follow me."

This had better be good.

Chapter the Seventeenth:

Thievery Is Fine Art

Matt lead me outside and just around the corner from the club, between it and the cemetery. He looked around the nearby streets, for what I'm not entirely sure. "Okay, we can talk here," he whispered, just after a guard passed by.

"What in blazes is going on here?! Just who in the hell are you?! What have I gotten into?!" I was perhaps a bit too excited.

"I can't give you those answers... yet. Suffice it to say that I am part of something that... well, even I don't exactly know exactly all that I am a part of. It is safer that way, in a sense. But I do know a few things which I can tell you if you prove to me that you can be trusted. It looks like I am going to need your help now that I am compromised." Money or no, this sounded like the kind of thing that nobody in their right mind would ever want to get involved with. Luckily for Matt, I was not a person who possessed any such 'right mind'. That much was clear from the very beginning. "How do I do that?" *I don't think you could possibly have me any more interested. You really know how to tweak a gal's curiosity.*

"Well, this may sound strange to you, but I'm here in Tarant to recover the skulls of the Renar Siamese twins... Their skulls are evidence that... well, I will fill you in if you bring them to me."

Oh my, now that was really unexpected. Oh, Matt, if only you knew how close you were. "Where would one find these skulls?" Any more information would be good, even if I was sure I already knew where to find them.

"Well, that's where this becomes difficult. The skulls had been interred in a mausoleum in the Tarant cemetery, but when I went looking for them..."

Even after death, those twins really get around. Perhaps they'll hire an

orchestra for the mausoleum's next get together? I do hope somebody spikes the punch. "So where would I look for them?" With Matt being as paranoid as he was, I couldn't be too careful. I was bound to get anything I could out of him.

"I do not know. I believe they are still in a Tarantian warehouse somewhere."

Got it. The address I'm looking for is for a warehouse. Piece of cake.

"Okay, I will do it. I shall return with the skulls."

In response Matt flattened himself against the club wall and looked out at the street nervously. "I'll be waiting." It was so melodramatic I almost laughed.

Leaving Matt behind to jump at shadows, I wandered through the center of Tarant towards where all the factories and warehouses were jammed together in the dirtier part of town. I turned when I reached Devonshire Way, remembering the paper I'd browsed in the Gentlemen's Club. I counted off the houses out loud as I passed them, "31...33...35...37 Devonshire Way, The Garringsburg Residence." I knocked on the door.

A half ogre servant let me in, of course. However would the upper class let people into their homes without half ogre servants? That's all the damn things seemed good for anyway. I approached the lady of the house, who was busy fanning herself nervously. "Good day, madam. I came to ask you a few questions about the painting that was stolen." *If I track it down the thieves guild will have to recognize me!* "I'm afraid that there's little to be done now. Two nights ago there was a break-in here at the mansion. In the morning we awoke to find that some of our most prized possessions had been stolen, including our beloved Kerghan and Persephone... a Pizarro original..."

Yes, yes, I'm sure it was a wonderful painting that you'll rue die without. "I'm so very sorry. Have the police any leads?" Dealing with the rich got tiresome awfully quickly. I sighed, knowing that the only reason I felt that way was because I envied them. No matter how much of 'the good life' I supposedly took part in, it always seemed like everybody else had it better. I wished I could be upset about a stupid painting instead of worrying about assassins.

"The police have had little luck in catching the criminals... it seems they've covered their tracks pretty well. There's a local paper around here somewhere describing the incident. You're welcome to it."
She gestures lazily.

"And I so loved that painting..."

Oh, yes, poor you... you lost a damned painting. Get over it, woman. It seemed like I didn't have much choice but to track the painting down myself if I wanted to have a chat with the people that stole it.

"Perhaps I could offer my services in finding the painting?"

"Oh, yes! I'd be most grateful! Would you really do that? I could offer you, oh, 500 gold pieces if you were to return it!"

"Of course, madam. I'd be honored to take..." *your money* "...the job! Might I ask you a few questions about the crime?"

"Yes, of course. What would you like to know?" She fanned herself irritably, as if having to tolerate the presence of one so lowly as myself were almost too difficult to bear.

"I was wondering how the thieves broke into the house here, what with your ogre servant at all." *I mean... are they ALL that useless? Or just most of them?*

"The front door. It was a professional job, as we heard nothing from our beds. Our butler, Polgram..."

she points to her half-ogre servant

"... was outside on his nightly patrol. The thief was in and out in minutes..."

Nightly patrol? That's rich. You send him out to look for trouble and because of it trouble walks right in through your front door. "Does anybody else have a key to your house?"

"No. My husband and I are the only people who have keys to the manor. Even Polgram is without one..."

They leave that poor thing out in the cold every night until they wake up in the morning so they can let him in? How awful. I suddenly had an epiphany. Half ogres were stupid, but not so stupid that they'd willingly sit out in the cold every night for the meager sum that made up their wages. I'd have bet 500 coins that Polgram didn't lock up when he went on his patrols. "Well, then who knew the painting was

here at the house?"

"No one beyond our closest friends. Of course my husband is apt to go out drinking with his friends on occasion... are there any men who don't enjoy the infrequent snifter of brandy? I suppose he might have revealed it in public in one of his... weaker moments..."

Weaker moments, indeed. 'Hey, guys! Look at me! I'm filthy rich!'
Braggart. He deserves what came to him. "Alright, madam, I'll see what I can turn up."

"Thank you so much. I look forward to the news." That was a hint that she expected me to succeed after having taken up so much of her precious time.

"Good day to you, madam." I let myself out, not wanting to tolerate her presence any more than I already had.

Since Mrs. Garringsburg had done little to actually give me anything more than useless information and dirty looks, I took to wandering about while utterly lost in thought. I'd been hoping to use the recovery of the painting to get the attention of the local thieves, and to get the painting it looked like I'd have to ask the thieves about it. It all seemed rather circular and that bothered me. In my reverie I took to wandering the park for the second time that day, simply taking in the splendid view. It was no surprise to me that the man calling himself Grak was no longer there.

"Dirty humans! Get out, you cowardly idiot!"

My reverie was interrupted by a halfwit halfling. *What the hell is his problem?* "I am sure you are not as stupid as you look. Nobody could be." I wasn't very well going to take that kind of abuse lying down.

"Human scum! I hope you rot!"

If it was a game of insults he wanted he would certainly get it. "Your mind is always fresh. It should be. You never use it."

He retorted yet again, almost seeming to enjoy himself. "Look here! A lippy, holier-than-thou human!"

I wasn't out of the game just yet, though. This was a golden opportunity to say all the things that I think about but have to hold in for politeness' sake. "You have been hit in the head once too often,

I think."

"Your kind are an evil blight on the world!" It was odd to hear him say such hateful things because the tone in his voice was actually somewhat cheerful. I didn't believe he actually held a grudge against humans, no matter how much he tried to drive the point home.

"You could not get a job as a firing squad target." I couldn't help but chuckle as I said it. *This feels good!*

"What are you gawping at, human scum?" he sneered falsely.

"Your mind is on vacation, but your mouth is working overtime." I chuckled some more, and Jayna started looking awfully confused. *Come on, dear girl, don't you have anything that you just want to shout out but can't for fear of being indecent? On second thought, maybe that's just me.*

"You humans are weak and cowardly, unfit to live." The halfling was almost at a full belly laugh by now and it was clear he was just playing around.

I began to tire of the situation, having mostly unburdened everything I wanted to say to the Tarantian nobility. Well, perhaps not everything, but some things just wouldn't be the same if I weren't saying it to their pompous faces. "You know... I think you actually enjoy insulting people."

He grins from ear to ear.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! So you have guessed my secret, my friend! It is true! May the gods forgive me, but I can't resist a bit of repartee. Seems uncommon to me. The name is Sammie White, but folks just call me..."

...doesn't know that she's a girl The irony of the situation was not lost on me. "I am Sammy... er... Samantha Colburn. Pardon my asking, but why is it you enjoy insulting people?"

"Why? Why not?! Tarant is meant to be the center of everything! Well, Sammie is telling you that it isn't that great. In fact, it is downright dreary after you get to know the place. And the folks here are arrogant stuffed shirts, mostly."

I listened quietly. He wasn't quite wrong, but it had been awhile since I saw somebody quite this bitter. My room at the Bridesdale lacked a mirror.

"Just look at all of these prim and proper types walking around, all dressed up in the latest fashion! Feeling superior to each other! It is enough to make you choke."

I glanced down at my dress nervously, oddly relieved to see I'd torn it up a bit more since my last sewing. "I see..." It was plain to me that I was conversing with some kind of twisted, long lost cousin who merely lacked my personal restraint.

"These folks are fat and rich. Furthermore, all they think about is how they can get even fatter and richer! It is disgusting."

He seems very proud of himself at this point.

"So I try to put them in their place. You know, back down here in the gutter with the rest of us."

"It is a dirty job, but someone must do it." *And now that I really think about it, I'm actually glad that someone isn't me.* "So what is it you do here?"

"Well, that's hard to say exactly, and not really any of your business either. Please be gone, or I shall taunt you again!"

As good as our insult war had felt I wasn't about to get into another just yet. *Oh who am I kidding?* "You could not get a job as a firing squad target." *Damnation. That was a repeat, wasn't it?*

I left behind Sammie's countless taunts and verbal jabs after a couple more rounds of insult tennis and finally got back on track to where I had been going in the first place: the warehouse district. I passed by a dingy bunk house appropriately titled, 'Poone's Flophouse'. Glancing in as I passed I noticed a man quickly sliding his hand out of a sleeping man's pocket. I investigated. "Excuse me, sir, but did I just catch you picking that other man's pocket?"

He looked around carefully, unsure of whether any of the other patrons had overheard. "Shh. Keep your voice down. Yeah, you saw right. Whaddya want, a medal?"

"I would like many metals... and it looks like you can teach me a few things about how to get them. Would you mind sharing a few tricks?" He seemed unsure and looked around the aptly named 'flophouse' a bit more before responding.

"Yeah... I can do that. I want 500 for teaching ya, though. You got it?"

"Yes, I do... and if you're any good at teaching I'll be able to make it back in no time. Here you go." I handed him the coins, crossing my arms and waiting for instructions.

He looks surprised.

"Thanks, lady."

He takes a few moments to review my skills and demonstrate some new techniques to me.

"There. Consider yourself an Expert at Picking Pockets. If you ever wanna be a Master, go see Sammie White. He hangs out near the Metro Station."

My mouth nearly dropped open. *Seriously? That bitter halfling in the park I was chatting with just minutes ago? I checked my purse more carefully. That son of a bitch... good heavens, this is really going to set me back.*

Chapter the Eighteenth: Every Town Has Its Less Savory Parts

It looked like between the cost of training and what old Sammie took I was damn near broke. Everything I'd been working for was suddenly gone. Furthermore, as poorly equipped as I was to handle any future assassins I couldn't exactly afford to not pick up the various parts I'd been looking at. *Dammit, dammit, dammit... What the hell am I going to do now?!* Luckily I was just across the street from 36 Low Dervish Row, so I figured I'd drop off the note I'd been asked to deliver for a quick 100 coin boost.

"We told you not to open it. That cost you your life."

How did they-? Oh hell. Now was not the time to think about how they knew I'd looked at the note. I slipped in-between two of the attackers and whirled off to the left, stabbing the third one but good. Virgil started hollering and making a nuisance of himself, slapping the men in the face with his quarterstaff while I did my work from behind. *Virgil... thanks.*

The men drew rusty old swords and laid into Virgil terribly. I winced as I saw them cut right through his overcoat, his blood beginning to run down the edge of their blades. He didn't falter one bit, he kept on screaming and attacking them, causing more than enough of a distraction for me to continue working. Jayna, unfortunately, didn't quite know what to do. She looked at me almost in awe as I dropped the third man to the ground.

"Quite impressive, madam!"

Suddenly it seemed like she noticed what was happening to Virgil and she began shouting. "No! Stop! Stop fighting!" she kept shouting over and over. "Virgil, no!" she shrieked as he got cut again and again. The second man made a strangled gurgling noise as blood bubbled up into his throat, frothing out of his mouth for a moment before he at last collapsed to the ground. Jayna screeched again,

tightly shutting her eyes. Shortly after, my blade found purchase between the third man's shoulder blades and he collapsed as well.

Sighing, Virgil worked what little magick he could and tried to clean up his wounds, but he didn't have nearly enough strength left after the beating he'd received. He removed his overcoat, looking at it sadly, and I could see his arms and torso were covered with slashes and bruises. Jayna finally opened her eyes and shuddered with horror as she looked at him. She immediately drew some salves out of her bag and began tending to him, flinching every time she applied the salve to each new wound. Virgil simply sighed and accepted it.

I tried to say something, *Virgil... I'm so sorry... this is all my fault...*, but the words simply wouldn't come out. *Why, Virgil? Why do you care so much, why do you try so hard to protect me? I don't deserve it, least of all from you.* I knew deep down that I was a terrible person, and an even worse friend.

As I watched Jayna tend to Virgil's wounds I felt like I had sunk to a new low. Virgil was quite seriously hurt and it was entirely my fault, and Jayna could barely keep herself together. Tears were streaming down her face. Virgil looked at me calmly, "Don't look at me like that. I've survived worse, I'll be fine."

Just like anybody else that's ever shown me even a lick of compassion, I've only brought pain to the both of you. Sighing, I bent down and put my weight beneath Virgil's arm, helping him stand up. "Come on. I think the church that Joachim mentioned is nearby. Let's see if we can't get you healed up. As usual, this one's my damn fault so the bill's on me."

Jayna looked up and smiled between sniffles and Virgil simply stared at me with the cutest little expression of shock on his face. I didn't say a damn word. *Think what you want, but I do care and I'm sick of hurting people. I didn't learn how to fight because I wanted to.* I helped Virgil into the church and set him down near the back. The priest rushed towards the back and began to mend Virgil's wounds without hesitation. I handed him almost all of my remaining few coins in thanks, without him even asking. "It's almost all I have left, but I want you to have it. I can always get more money. I can't get another Virgil."

Virgil's face turned a rather bright shade of red and Jayna hugged him. Before anybody could say anything else I asked the priest, "What can you tell me about the Panarii?"

"The Panarii cult is based on the teachings of Nasrudin, an elf who lived during the Age of Legends. As head of the Elven Council, Nasrudin acted as a guide for all of the races until the rise of Arronax and his evil followers. Nasrudin waged war, and Arronax was defeated... the church was founded shortly after this."

Well, if I can ask anybody I can ask this fellow. "What can you tell me about this Arronax?" Virgil stared at me, unbelieving. I almost felt offended that my actions seemed so foreign and unexpected.

"Arronax was an evil elf who came into power during the Age of Legends. He believed that only he and his followers were fit to rule, and decreed death to all of the races. Nasrudin, in his mercy, came to our defense and protected us from Arronax... defeating Arronax, banishing him forever to the Void."

Of course I'd heard the occasional cryptic tale about banishment, but I was still rightly confused over the whole process. How was it done? What happened to the victims? "What do you mean, he was 'banished'?"

"We're not quite sure exactly what happens... no one is banished anymore. We believe that it took powerful magick to do so, and once banished, that person never returned. The Void is a term used to describe where one goes when banished, but no one knows if it was even a real place. But the Archaeon speaks of it, and so we believe." Sadly, it seemed like I already knew most of what there was to be known about the whole deal. It certainly explained why there hadn't been a book in Frederick's study titled 'The How and Why of Banishment'. "Has anyone else ever been banished?"

"Yes... the Archaeon speaks of others who suffered the same fate as Arronax. There are a few who are listed by name: Gorgoth, Kraka-tur, Kerghan, and the Bane of Kree. They were all evil beings, but none were so evil as Arronax. If you ever see the Archaeon, you can read more about them."

He kept saying that word... 'archaeon'. I knew I'd heard it before somewhere, but I'd be damned if I could remember where. "What is the Archaeon?"

"The sacred book of Nasrudin's teachings? It is housed in the First

Temple of the Panarii in Caladon. You can see it there..."

That would certainly explain why it sounded familiar. Of course I was aware of the Panarii in my hometown, though I'd never previously deigned to pay them a visit. I've never had much faith, nor much cause to have any. "Could you tell me what you know about Nasrudin?" *While I'm asking I might as well ask about the whole bit.*

Virgil needs to take a load off anyway, and it'll probably make him feel better if I take this stuff seriously. As seriously as I can manage anyway.

"Nasrudin was the benevolent leader of the Elven Council. For years, he ruled all of Arcanum and brought peace and prosperity to all of the races. His teachings are recorded in the sacred Archaeon, and are the cornerstone of all Panarii beliefs."

I swallowed hard. It was time to ask the uncomfortable question. The question that sometimes kept me up at night and sometimes made me laugh out loud at how silly it all was. *Am I Nasrudin's reincarnation?*

"Are there any prophecies that he will return?"

"Yes... it is called the Prophecy of the Living One. It is written in the Archaeon that one day both Nasrudin and Arronax will return to Arcanum and fight the final battle."

Religion is always so bloody cryptic. Is he coming back or is somebody else going to represent him?... like, say, me. "I don't understand. Isn't Nasrudin dead?"

"Yes... he has been dead for a long time. The literal meaning of the prophecy is unknown... many believe that they will both be reincarnated, or that the prophecy is a metaphor for something more contemporary. The truth is, we just don't know..."

...and that's about where I come in, eh? Bloody ridiculous... no... I have to respect Virgil's beliefs. It's the least I can do for him when those beliefs are his entire reason for wanting to protect me. "Thank you very much for your time, sir. I'll be leaving, then."

"I'm glad you stopped in, my friend. Would you like a pamphlet before you go?"

Damnation. I suppose I did promise, even if I never promised it out loud.

"Sure."

ARE YOU CONFUSED IN
THIS NEW WORLD OF
MAGICK AND
TECHNOLOGY?

ARE YOU SAD ABOUT A
LACK OF REVERENCE FOR
THE OLD WAYS?

THEN THE PANARII RELIGION
IS FOR YOU !!!

Based on the teachings of the the great
elf Nasrudin, the Panarii religion
offers truth and guidance in this world
of quick-remedies and sooth-sayers!
But don't believe us! Listen to what
others have said about the Panarii and
its beliefs!

"I've never been happier! I even sold my
Staff of Hideous Death!"

-Wermian Doone, former Dark
Necromancer

"Punaree good! Ugg! OOnngaa!"

-Terg Skullcrusher, former Ogre
Shaman

"Those Panarii buggers are alright in
my book!"

-Prock Hillegman, former Half-Orc
Bounty Hunter.

We accept all races! All walks of life!
Come and share in the ancient elven
wisdom and see how it applies to life
today! We're always open! Come one
come all!

I failed to see how this bloody thing was supposed to create any converts. Silly pamphlets aside, however, I was beginning to see why Virgil believed so strongly in this panarii business... and I didn't think it had anything to do with the religion itself. While it was interesting to hear about given that I was supposed to be The Living One, I suspected Virgil's beliefs had a lot more to do with that Elder Joachim fellow. I had to start considering the possibility that he

didn't actually want to dismember me.

As we left the Panarii temple Virgil looked in my direction. He smiled warmly and said, "Thank you, Miss Colburn."

The expression on my face must have been hilarious because he burst out laughing the second I looked at him. "Virgil, please. Don't ever call me that. You make me sound like the promising young daughter of some gnomish nobleman. Ugh. Just call me Samantha, won't you?"

He nodded, "Sure.... Thank you, Samantha."

I stared at him hard through wide eyes, noting the bruises that still adorned his face despite all of the magick and the salves. "No, Virgil, thank you. You took that beating instead of me, and it was a beating I deserved. You don't owe me any thanks or anything else for that matter."

He seemed like he wanted to respond to that, but one look in my eyes and he knew it was pointless. He sighed and kept his mouth shut. All three of us remained silent for a good while after that. I traveled in the direction towards Mulligan Bone Alley, but on the way I noticed a sign advertising 'Stanton Importers'. I stepped inside briefly.

A man sat at a plain, undecorated desk in the center of the room guarded on either side by half ogres. *I swear, this is really getting out of hand. Those damn things are in more buildings than they aren't.* "Pardon me, sir, I was looking to inquire about the Bessie Toone mine. Specifically, I was wondering if you might relinquish ownership back to the Toones."

"Hah! Why should I do that? I paid that little weasel good money for his worthless mine! Unless... you were planning on making it worth my while?"

Hmph. You think you're a shrewd businessmen, do you? "What is the going rate for a worthless mine, anyway? What kind of a price is brittle iron fetching on the market, assuming you bother to pay workers to retrieve it?"

"Hmm. I could let it go for... let's say 1,000 coins."

Didn't even skip a beat. I didn't really like the way he was looking at his ogre guards, waiting for me to respond. I began to see how Percy got himself into this mess in the first place. I wasn't about to make the same mistake, especially not when that would involve dragging Virgil and Jayna into it along with me... again. The way I saw things I could still make 150 coins of profit if Percy held up his end of the bargain. "Okay, I'll take it."

"Done." He wasted no time in accepting my payment and handing the deed over to me. It was an overpayment to be sure, but there was less violence this way and the both of us made a profit... even if one of us didn't really deserve it. *I suppose it's not like I deserve it, either. We're both profiting on the misfortune of the Toone family.*

I left Mr. Stanton's store and finally made my way over to 57 Mulligan Bone Alley where the infamous Siamese twin skulls awaited me. Also awaiting me was another half ogre. *Of course, of course... what other race is dumb enough to guard an otherwise empty shack for 2 coins a day?*

"I believe you have the wrong house, madam. Perhaps you'd better leave."

"So sorry. I'll not bother you anymore. Good day." Half ogres were the perfect guards, really. Strong, and too dumb to realize they were being underpaid. Their stupidity also made it rather difficult to bribe them. *How the hell can you bribe a creature that doesn't understand that a hundred gold is more than five?* No matter, sneaking past them provided little difficulty. They truly were worthless things, for the most part.

That's not a pair of skulls... but on the plus side it's worth no less than three times what the skulls are anyway. I'll be taking that. Although I was one 'Kerghan and Persephone' richer, I hadn't a damn clue remaining on how to get my hands on the skulls.

I didn't want to wander all over town with a stolen painting so I hastily made my way back towards the Garringsburg residence. On my way I was flagged down by a gnome in front of a seemingly abandoned warehouse. I saw him eyeing up the dagger on my belt and the bruises on Virgil's face. "Excuse me, madam... pardon me, my

name is Simon Plough and I couldn't help but notice you're a woman that looks like she can take care of herself."

"I've recently inherited these warehouses here, and I need to sell them to pay off my debts. But I have a rat problem. A BIG rat problem. And no one will purchase them from me until the rats are eradicated."

All right... you've got my interest. Flattery will get you everywhere. "How much would you pay for me to do away with these rats?"

"I need the money the sale of these properties would give me desperately. You can take whatever you find as you're cleaning them out as your payment, if you'd like. There should be at least a few valuable odds and ends of a technological nature."

If I ever managed to get ahold of those technical manuals I'd been wanting so desperately I would be able to make excellent use of spare parts, so I agreed. "That is no problem, sir. I will take care of it for you." He handed me a key to the warehouse and I went inside. I slipped on my armor since I was expecting a bit of 'trouble'.

There were quite a few rats inhabiting the smaller of the two buildings on the property, and I imagined the other building would have even more. I was certainly glad for that orcish thug's armor, and my own ability to sew up that nasty little hole in the back from when I 'acquired' it. The rats had a severe difficulty biting through the armor and I was easily able to dispatch them. *Aggressive little bastards, aren't they?*

As I expected the larger of the two buildings was even worse. Not only were there even more rats, but there were significantly larger rats as well. *They're like goldfish... the bigger their homes the bigger they grow.* I dispatched the larger specimens first in case they had better luck biting through my armor. I didn't want to waste Jayna's salves needlessly and Virgil was having an increasingly difficult time working magick on me. *I can't help it that I like to tinker with locks, it's a perfectly natural fascination, I tell you.*

Luckily for me, and for Mr. Plough, the warehouse was indeed well stocked with assorted junk. The parts that I couldn't make use of would fetch a suitable reward from the junk dealer and the parts that I could use would bring me no end of joy. Honestly, the whole ordeal was one of the more straightforward and pleasant business

transactions I'd dealt with in recent memory. The only things in need of stabbing were a few rats and that was one creature I held no love for at all.

Once all the rats were dead I slipped my dress back on and paid Mr. Plough a visit. "Your warehouse is free of rats, sir... though you might want to see to removing their corpses. I'll only do so much work for what you're paying me."

"Thank you so very much. You have helped me more than you could know. I am sorry that I have nothing to give you but my thanks."

"That is quite all right. Good day." I had a painting to deliver anyway, and Mr. Plough had been nothing but honest.

I made my way back to the Garringsburg residence where Polgram let me in once again. Mrs. Garringsburg's jaw dropped open at the sight of the painting. "Here you are, madam. All in one piece even."

"That's wonderful, Samantha Colburn! I'm so glad. I knew you were a woman of good character! Here's your reward..."

It sounds so damned formal when you say it like that. I do like your reward money, though. This is a good start to replacing what Sammie took. "Thank you, madam. Glad to be of service."

"I'm going to call the paper right now! The whole town will know by morning that you're a woman who can get the job done!"

Oh that's just what I need... even more people in this town shouting my name from every street corner. As if I hadn't garnered enough attention already. With any luck her good word would provide me with even more work. I definitely needed the coin. "I appreciate the vote of confidence. Good day to you, madam."

Now where the bloody hell could those skulls have gotten off to?

Chapter the Nineteenth: Mysteries and Abominations of the Known Universe

I wandered around Tarant for a good long while, nearly until the evening. Various shops were closing up and I still had no idea where to start looking for the skulls. Matt had mentioned they would be in a warehouse somewhere, but they certainly weren't at 57 Mulligan Bone Alley nor were they in Simon Plough's warehouse. If I were going to track the damn things down I really needed to put some thought into it.

Out of nowhere the thought suddenly hit me. I remembered that old foppish bastard Ristezze (how could I forget) talking about a museum of oddities and legends right here in Tarant. Not too far from the gate to the old castle I found it: "H.T. Parnell's". It was certainly worth checking out.

There were all manner of strange things inside, or at least that's what the proprietor wanted customers to think. Most of them seemed like cheap knock offs or rumors made real through the expenditure of coin. It didn't instill a great deal of confidence.

There was a rather poorly carved rock labeled a 'petrified dragon', which seemed quite silly. Living creatures weren't often petrified, let alone the now-extinct dragons. Their bones, certainly, but not the whole creatures. Even beyond that they belonged in a more proper location like the zoological society, not just another knickknack in a run down tourist museum.

Another exhibit was labeled, 'Amazing Miniature Steam Engine! Actually works!' *Hogwash. If such a thing existed the rich would be driving their own personal trains all around Arcanum.*

I almost laughed when I read the plaque describing a misshapen rock as 'The Evil Arronax'. *Well if I'm supposed to fight THAT I suppose this Living One business is a piece of cake.*

A glass case held a collection of moth-eaten bear pelts stitched together poorly and labeled 'The Stillwater Giant'. *Just great, a backwater legend given life by bad sewing skills*

The last plaque I looked at described an actual living, breathing creature: "The amazing Gar! The World's Most Intelligent Orc!" This brutish-looking orc glares at me through heavy lids. He looks every bit the primitive orc.

"Ugh. I Gar, world's smartest orc. You have got question?"

I was rather at a loss for words. What exactly does one say to the world's smartest orc? "I do not know. What is your area of expertise?"

He grunted and let forth a rather crude belch. "I know much things. Gar tell all. Politics. Mathematics. Tea."

One of those things didn't seem to fit. "Tea?" Virgil started checking out another nearby exhibit which claimed to be an authentic Kree shrunken head.

"Yes. Gar like tea. Gar civilized. Gar say Earl Grey best. Made from blend of black teas and oil from the Bergamot plant. Excellent, Gar say."

"I'm not much for the black teas, I prefer green myself." Frederick had introduced me to them and I never went back.

Gar's demeanor begins to change. His eyes begin to open fully, but then a look of realization crosses his face and he suddenly regains his old appearance.

"Ugh. Gar no like green tea. Good for foreigner, not gentleman."

How strange. "You were going to say something else, weren't you?"

He grunted again and looked around the room nervously. "No. Gar say only what Gar means." *A likely story. I smell a fraud, just like everything else in this damned 'museum'.*

"Nevermind then. What can you tell me of the politics of Tarant?"

"Tarant foremost representative democracy in Arcanum. Chairman Willoughsby try align Tarant with Caladon, cause him much trouble. Councilman Braithe call for him step down, us invade Caladon. He no like Caladon because it monarchy. Main question be: can democracy join with monarchy and not destabilize?"

Hah, well put... for an orc. "What else can you tell me of politics in Arcanum?"

"Cumbria kingdom dying. Refuse all technology. Lose all provinces. Gar think King Praetor stupid. Other places side Caladon or Tarant. Few try be alone."

He was right, of course. Too right for an orc. I suppose that was what the 'smartest' bit was all about, but I still didn't believe it. "Alright. You said you know mathematics, right? Tell me, what is 4573200 divided by 6543?"

He looks at me as if me amuse him.

"Gar not genius. Gar smarter than other orcs. Not smarter than professor of mathematics. I know x equals 2. No other orc tell you that."

"That may be, but orcs are idiots." It was rude and blunt, but so very true.

He started laughing a hearty belly laugh. "You smart. Now you understand. Gar world's smartest ORC"

I decided to take my leave before the green paint covering his skin started to flake off. I wandered over to the proprietor, the grand windbag himself, H.T. Parnell. "Pardon me, sir. What can you tell me about Gar the Orc over there?"

"Ah, yes, Gar the Orc! I rescued him from some orc slavers on one of my many expeditions searching for oddities in exotic lands. They had recently captured him and were about to execute him when I intervened! They mistook his intelligence for supernatural possession, you see."

The general populace must be even more gullible than I thought. "Right, then. What about the cow with two heads?"

"Ah! That enigmatic cud-chewer was shot on safari in the wastes of Vendigroth! Who can say what sorcery or forbidden scientifics were called upon to create such a beast! You might not think of it to look

at it, but it was a man-eater, it was."

"A man eater? Sir, you stretch the bounds of believability." *There's got to be a hole in here somewhere. I will expose you.*

He started acting shocked and hurt by my comment, "Madam, I would never gild the truth! I am a man of honesty!"

Right. Of course you are. "Then what about the petrified dragon? Surely no living, breathing creature could succumb to complete petrification?"

The way he shrugged off my questions was more than irksome. "Magnificent, is it not? I find it one of my saddest exhibits, a remnant of the world gone by. The young dragon, spearated from its mother for all eternity!"

He had an exceptional amount of practice at deflecting suspicion. Perhaps the locals weren't as gullible as I'd first thought. Ristezze on the other hand.... "How about that strange rock? The one you have labeled as the 'evil Arronax'? Is it really more than just a rock?"

"That is the face of none other than Arronax, mysteriously burned into the rock by mystical forces during his banishment to the nether realms!"

Ugh. There's got to be a weakness in here somewhere. "Well, how about the engine then? Surely no mechanical device that small could actually function for real?"

"That is an exact scale replica of the first Bates steam engine, made exclusively from toothpicks and string! And it works, too!"

If it truly worked, it would be a burnt out husk after its first operation. Toothpicks are flammable you idiot. "Then what about that monstrosity behind you? The pelt of the Stillwater giant? Such a creature does not even exist, good sir!"

"That is one of my most famous exhibits. It creates a sense of awe just to see a ferocious creature of that magnitude, a holdout from Arcanum's distant past! What must it have been like to see fields of those creatures hunting their prey?"

"How did you come to acquire such a rare and mysterious pelt from a creature of legend?" *This ought to be good.*

"Franklin Payne, world-renowned adventurer under contract to me, tracked the elusive creature to its lair, only to have the shifting winds betray his presence! Before he could even raise his weapon, the awful beast attacked!"

Yes, right. I'm sure a modern day hunter tracked down a legendary beast that fell extinct decades ago. "And then what happened?"

"Armed only with a small dagger, Payne leapt upon the creature! Much blood was shed by man and beast, but Payne emerged victor after impaling the creature on one of its own claws!"

"One of its own claws? Sir, that seems a bit farfetched. I think your entire museum here is nothing but a farce."

He looked at me with downcast eyes, "Madam, that is terribly rude of you. Just what are you insinuating?"

I was almost angry at his blatant lies. It was so... deceitful! I wished I'd thought of it first. *Do you really think me that much of a fool?* "I am insinuating that you are a pompous, lying windbag of the worst possible sort.

"Wait! You'd be forced to peer into its death struggles!"

"More likely honed stealing money from old ladies and children. Have you no shame, sir?" It felt kind of hypocritical to say that, but at least I only stole from old ladies who also happened to be rich. There weren't many rich children or I'd probably have stolen from them, too.

Much to my surprise, Mr. Parnell picked up the rifle leaning up next to the glass case and began firing at me. "What in blazes?! No! Stop! Please, stop!" It was too late. Jayna took cover behind a sofa and Virgil was advancing on Mr. Parnell with his staff. The orc drew a blade and ran after Virgil with it. *Dammit!... please... no... another fine mess my mouth has gotten the lot of us into.*

I couldn't very well leave Virgil to die, which he most certainly would have outnumbered and outgunned as he was. I snuck behind the orc and stabbed him in the back, hoping to merely disable him instead of kill him outright. The orc groaned and his blood began to drop onto

the floor. H.T. Parnell turned and fired at me, but I was rather well concealed behind the orc. The shot struck the orc clear in the stomach and at such close range it caused quite the greivous wound. It seemed unlikely for the poor thing to survive, so I put it out of its misery.

Growling, I leapt at the man with the gun and jammed my dagger straight into the side of his neck. Blood came rushing out as though from a fountain and the man's grip on his gun loosened. I stabbed him again, lower in the stomach, and he sank to his knees. Virgil took the opportunity to give him a good thump on the back of the head and he toppled forward, no longer moving.

"I... I'm sorry, Virgil." Tears started to come to my eyes, tears of utter shame. "I just can't seem to keep my bloody mouth shut, can I? What next? How am I going to try and get the whole lot of us killed next time?"

He shook his head, "Think nothing of it, mad- er... Samantha." He shrugged sheepishly. "You said nothing which was untrue."

I sighed and stared around the room with a frown, "I could've just said nothing at all, you know. ...and that poor, orc, he didn't know any better. Well, he probably did... and he's probably not an orc either... but I feel horrible. Are you all right at least?" Jayna poked her head up from behind the sofa and stared at me with wide eyes.

Virgil put a hand on my shoulder reassuringly, "I'm fine. Not even a scratch on me. That bastard's aim was as bad as those stories he was telling."

I sighed and picked up the fallen rifle, shoving it in my purse. "Come on, Virgil... Jayna... let's go." The three of us walked down the street and were already several blocks away by the time several guards went rushing into the museum to investigate the sound of gunshots. I tried to shake off the foul mood that I could feel coming on in the wake of yet more needless killing. Virgil wasn't upset, and even Jayna seemed fine. She was a bit quiet, but she had been ever since she had to patch Virgil up with a few of her salves. I idly wondered what had been on her mind.

I tried to think of where else I could look for the skulls, preferably somewhere that wouldn't end up with me horribly maiming anybody else. I passed by a sign advertising 'Delores Beston, Seer of the Unknown'. *I suppose I could use a good cheering up. Either I'll get a few laughs or the location of the missing skulls, either is fine by me at this point.*

I stepped into the shop and a woman about my age stared at me expressionless from across a small table. I tried to be polite, "Good day, madam Delores. Could I ask for a reading?"

"I'm very sorry, but currently I am having a problem with my crystal ball. I dropped it the other day, and my visions have been foggy ever since. I've looked into finding another one, but as you might guess, crystal balls are not a common commodity..."

"I'd assume so. Perhaps I could assist you in finding another?" *Option three, another opportunity to make more gold.* I wasn't going to pass by any opportunity for more money at this point. I needed money badly and my options were growing more and more limited it seemed. She smiles mysteriously.

"Yes, I thought you might say that. I have a feeling for such things, you know. From the moment you walked in here. I knew you were something special..."

"Let's not get carried away, madam..." *Just tell me how to get a replacement, I'll get it, you'll pay me, and we'll both be happy. Shove off with all of this seer nonsense, please.*

"I understand... not everyone is a believer. In any case, I would very much appreciate your help. If you were to find me a new crystal ball, I'd pay you gold pieces. What do you say?"

There were a lot of things I'd do for 200 coins. Stealing a crystal ball from wherever I could find it was hardly low on the list. "Of course... I'd be glad to assist you."

"Splendid! Now... I may be able to assist you in finding one... As I told you, my crystal ball is not working correctly, but sometimes a physical piece of the person I am viewing helps to clear the vision. Might I have a lock of your hair?"

Crazy wench. Whatever, it's not like my hair is doing me any good anyway. "Of course."

"Wonderful!"

She takes out scissors and cuts a small lock of my hair.

"Now we look into the ball, see what is to be seen."

She stares intently, waving the lock in front of her face.

"Cloudy, but something is coming clear... yes! I see where you might be able to procure a ball!"

I had to admit I was almost interested for a very, very brief moment.

"Where?" She was definitely a good actress.

"South in the warehouse district, I see the Bordello there... a small shop just beside it... I see a sign... Madame Toussaude's! Within that shop is a crystal ball! Find Madame Toussaude and you will find a crystal ball."

Why does this all sound awfully rehearsed? "Madam Toussaude? Do you know anything of her?"

"I can't say I've ever heard of her myself... there are so many self-proclaimed soothsayers in Tarant. More than likely she's some fly-by-night gypsy out to make a quick buck. BUT BE CAREFUL... you never know what to expect from these nomads."

Ah, a competitor. Of course, I should've guessed. Still, 200 coin is 200 coin. Why should I care which liar ends up bilking more out of the gullible? I briefly toyed with the idea of telling the woman just how phony I thought the whole thing was, but I quickly realized I'd better just keep my damned mouth shut. If I couldn't control myself I would have to buy myself a muzzle. "I will, dear lady. Thank you for the advice. I'll return later..."

I set out to find this 'Madam Toussaude'. It was as good of a place as any to swipe the crystal ball from, after all, and I had no other leads. I found her shop exactly where I was told it would be, ignoring the bordello rather purposefully. *Well, I could just stop in and... ugh. Am I really getting that desperate for money?* I snuck into Madam Toussaude's tiny shop quite carefully, but the woman suddenly spoke to me without even looking up, "Hello. I've been expecting you, traveler."

Damn... she saw me so easily. I was a bit unnerved at her perceptiveness, and especially her attention to detail despite the darkness of the shop. She'd been able to spot the signs of my travel easily. "Really? And why would that be?" I tried to play it off as mere

observation.

"I think you know why."

She looks at me with dark eyes shining in the candlelight.

"You've been speaking with Delores Beston. I know the real reason you're here, but I don't think YOU do..."

Things were starting to get just a little bit creepy for my tastes. *She can't know that, can she? Was she spying on me? No, I would've noticed... hell, I'd better not try lying my way through this one. Best play it safe.*

"What do you mean? She merely wants your crystal ball..."

She smiles darkly.

"Listen to me. Delores Beston came to my shop not three days ago to ask for her fortune. I told her, traveler... and here we are. We are all a part of what is to come, and it is YOU that must choose."

I did NOT like the woman's tone of voice at all. She sounded like she was threatening me. *The rumors can't be true... can they? Is this woman really...?* "Just tell me what's going on..." I tapped my foot nervously.

The woman stood up from behind her small table, her eyes nearly glowing in the candlelight... at least I hoped it was the candlelight. She shouted at me, "CHOOSE, COWARD, OR I WILL CHOOSE FOR YOU! On which side will you fall? Mine, or Delores Beston's?"

I was admittedly frightened, and justifiably so. The woman's reputation preceded her and everything I'd witnessed up to that point suggested it was true. Perhaps she was naturally gifted, or maybe she'd studied in Tulla, I didn't really care. I was convinced she was the genuine article and I wasn't about to risk my life just for another couple hundred coin no matter how desperate I got. "I side with you..." *All right, so I'm probably not getting paid for this one. If I really, really must... there's always the bordello. Ugh, I can't believe I'm even thinking about it.*

The fire in her eyes subsides. She whispers.

"Very good, I believe you have chosen wisely, traveler. You may have this crystal ball. I only ask that you take it to Delores and give it to her."

My fear started to subside, and in its place lingered only confusion.

"What? But I thought..."

"Things aren't always as they seem, traveler. I ask you to do this for me... will you?" Her eyes were positively frightening. I didn't dare

refuse. *This is completely crazy. I'm like some specialized beacon for trouble.*

Crazy or no, I decided to nervously try my luck. "What do I get in return?" *Besides the privilege of continuing to live, that is.*

Her voice lowers and she whispers, almost inaudibly...

"There are gifts I can bestow that go beyond the material realm. You'll have to trust me, traveler. I will give you payment."

Hmm... perhaps I can still recover the coin from Delores anyway. There's still profit in this... and continued living. "I'll do it."

Madam Toussaude smiled and gently handed me her crystal ball. "I shall await your return" I left her shop quickly, trying to shake off the shivers on my spine as I did so. Virgil and Jayna were uneasily silent.

I wasted no time in traveling quite directly to Delores' shop. I didn't want to hang onto the crystal ball any longer than I had to. "Here you are, Delores, just like we agreed. Madam Toussaude had the crystal ball exactly as you predicted. May I have my 200 coins now? I really must be going, I'm in quite the hurry today..." I hoped my nervousness didn't show.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! Ha! The old crone knew absolutely nothing at all! I knew she was a fake from the very beginning."

Coins... please... must go... "I'm sorry... what do you mean?"

"Oh, if you must know. I'd heard rumors about her around town... people said she could actually see the future! Rubbish! No one can REALLY see anything... it's all an act! I talk to those old ladies all day long... I tell them exactly what they want to hear. So I went to this Madame Toussaude, and I told her I wanted her to see MY future."

I'd heard those same rumors... and I'm inclined to maybe believe them.

"And what did she say?"

"She told me that a stranger would walk into my store one day, and that she would be my death. Can you believe it? My death! So when I saw you come in here, you can imagine my surprise... and my fears."

"Of course..." *I suppose I am the death of a lot of people. Doesn't take a seer to figure that one out.*

"But don't you see the irony? You've gone and killed her! SHE was the

one who needed to fear you, not me! I broke my own crystal ball just in case someone did show up... and in the end, you kill HER and I get her crystal ball thrown in just for good measure? Ha! So much for old Madame Toussaude..."

Oh no, I wouldn't dare... she'd see me coming a mile away. "I never said she was dead, Delores..."

Her face went immediately white. "Wh-h-at? How did you get the ball...?"

She started backing up, getting as far away from me as she could before reaching the back wall. "She gave it to me. To give to you..."

"I don't... no... please... get it away from me...!" she screamed.

Apologies, but I'm doing what I was told to do. If she's a fake, no loss for me. If she's real, it's your fault for starting this business in the first place. "It's a gift, Delores. Just for you..." I tossed her the crystal ball and, without thinking, she caught it.

"Oh god! Well... I see."

As her hands touched the glass a malevolent red specter rose from the ground with an awful groan. It enveloped her entire body, pulsating. Her screams faded quickly after her torso separated through the middle. At the sight of blood pouring out of her separated halves I ran out the door as quickly as possible. I ran far and fast, nearly reaching the entrance of Tarant before I stopped to catch my breath.

I grabbed Virgil by the shoulders, "What in the gods just happened?! Tell me!" I noticed Jayna clutching onto his arm as well. It seemed I wasn't the only one who was frightened.

Virgil looked quite sad and startled as well. Although he wasn't panicking nearly as badly as Jayna and I, there was still fear and uncertainty in his eyes. "I... I don't know. There are some things in this world that aren't quite so easily understood. If I may say one thing... I think it would be unwise to get on Madam Toussaude's bad side. We should at least tell her that we've done as she asked. It's the safe thing to do."

Tears formed in my eyes out of panic and fear, but I acquiesced. "Yes, Virgil, you're right. We'll do just that... and then let us never speak of this again."

Madam Toussaude was waiting for me expectantly yet again when I returned to her shop. "It's done, you cruel wench. She's dead."

"Yes, Delores Beston tried to run from her fate, but as I always say, traveler, the future is inevitable. Now... we had an agreement?"

I gulped, my habits getting the better of me. "Yes... payment would be nice..." *No, no, I'm sorry... I didn't mean it, really. You don't have to pay me. Just let me live!*

"I see. Perhaps there is something else I can offer..."

She closes her eyes, waving her hands in front of my face.

"You feel something strange in the air, but otherwise feel nothing at all. There."

I was extremely confused. "What? What did you do?"

She smiled a sinister, all-knowing smile and for once I wasn't going to question just how much she did or did not know. "You'll find out in time. Trust me, you'll be happy when you find out..."

I wasn't about to argue. "Thank you then, in advance. Good day to you..." I got the hell out of there as fast as I could.

These bloody skulls will absolutely be the death of me, I'm sure of it.

Chapter the Twentieth: Unpleasant Reminders Lurk Around Every Corner

Even as the next morning dawned I was still quite rattled over the previous night's events. I was beginning to wonder if Matt de Cesare's paranoia was more than just a figment of his imagination. Things had been inexplicably dangerous since I started trying to search out those skulls. Perhaps there really was something extraordinary about them, and I had to give serious consideration as to whether I cared to continue pursuing them or not. At the very least I decided to put it off for awhile to give myself a chance to think it over.

Even if I did decide to continue looking for them I was going to need to better protect myself. I'd been travelling too far and too long with what meager equipment I'd been able to scrape together and I desperately needed better. That, of course, would require a great deal more money than I actually had. As if to answer my unspoken desires a woman in a dress rather similar to my own (though significantly cleaner and less torn) beckoned me over to the side of the street.

I approached her cautiously and she whispered to me, "I heard about you from Mrs. Garringsburg." She certainly had my interest.

This beautiful, finely dressed woman casts a cautious glance around before addressing me in hushed tones.

"There is something a resourceful individual may be able to help me with..."

"...and what would that be? I'm listening."

She held a finger to her mouth and shushed me frantically. "Shh! We can't talk here! Please, meet me at my house later and I will fill you in on my needs. I reside at 3 Lungsten Road. Good day." She turned and walked off, looking about carefully to make sure nobody noticed

our conversation.

I was put off and even a bit annoyed at her cautiousness, but it was my hope that it meant the final result of this job would be a payment significant enough to offset what I lost to Sammy. The streets of Tarant were busy as usual, so it wasn't difficult to kill a bit of time browsing around the local shops and chatting politely with random passersby. When I felt enough time had passed I proceeded to the address the woman mentioned, the Pettibone residence.

"Good, you came! I need to know whether you can be discreet. I have something very important I need done, but no one must know about it."

What do you think I've been doing for the last couple hours? Taking in the fresh air purely for my health? "My discretion depends on what you are asking of me, miss...?" It wouldn't be wise to fully commit until I heard her request in its entirety.

"Excuse me, where are my manners? I am Mrs. Cassandra Pettibone, wife of Basil Pettibone, lower assemblyman of the gnomish conglomerate within the Industrial Council. Welcome to my humble abode."

Ah, the wife of a gnome. She was definitely loaded, all I had to do was convince her to part with enough of it. "Pleased to meet you. Now, about this job..."

"I must tell you, I have been in such a state since that Mrs. Willoughbsby brought home her elven funeral dagger. She thinks she's such the height of fashion!"

Oh, woe is you. How dare she have something more fashionable. Stealing trinkets from the rich was not a problem and I was looking for a shortcut. "Would you like me to steal it for you?" I hoped that by cutting to the point I wouldn't have to listen to nearly as much of her pomposity.

"No, that wouldn't do. I need to upstage her! I need the most unique elven artifact of all Tarantian society. Then those shrews in the Women's Auxiliary will respect me. They are jealous of my good looks, you know."

What makes you think they'll respect you instead of secretly plotting to upstage you like you're doing to Mrs. Willoughbsby right now? Ugh,

nevermind. I don't even care. I hated the woman with a fierce passion, and could only think of the many ways in which I could obtain a fraction of her wealth... with or without her consent. My impatience began to show through in my speech, "Do you have something specific in mind?"

"Here, look at this."

She hands me a newspaper.

"Have you heard about the elven burial catacombs they've unearthed in the Morbihan Plains? Look at the engraving of this funerary stone! It is simply fabulous! I must have it."

Robbing ancient elven tombs was a pricy proposition. Luckily for me there was bound to be plenty more valuables than whatever silly stone the woman wanted, but that was no reason not to try and extort the wench for whatever she'd give out. "That seems a bit dangerous, what are you willing to pay?"

She made a dissatisfied 'hrumph' noise as if mentioning price was offensive to her. "I would be prepared to offer you 250 coins for your troubles."

I may be broke, but that's an insult! She would've been slapped across the face for such an offer if I didn't have an interest in exploring those catacombs anyway. As it was I just needed to negotiate a bit.

"That's not enough to risk my life for. 300 is my price."

"I am sorry, I cannot afford such an extravagant fee. 500 gold is all I have."

The wife of an assemblyman quibbling over a measly 50 coins? I will rob you blind in your sleep out of sheer spite. You don't deserve to keep your damned money. "I suppose 250 will suffice." It was a bald faced lie, but I'd extract the rest of my payment one way or another.

"Excellent! Let me mark your map with the location of the elven tombs. Please hurry back with my treasure. I cannot wait to see Mrs. Willoughbsby's face turn green with envy."

You, madam, are a shallow, conceited, pompous plague on the otherwise fine, upstanding members of the Tarantian upper class. I actually despised most of the upper class, but compared to this woman they were saints. I had what I wanted for the time being, however, so I took my leave of her.

Unfortunately both of my remaining jobs were more dangerous than I was willing to take on with my patchy leather armor and the low tech blade Mr. Gurloes had made for me. I could rectify the situation with money, but getting money required doing jobs. It was a rather circular conundrum and I was growing desperate.

"Welcome to Madam Lil's, miss."

Ugh, does even desperation not have its limits? An uncomfortable feeling built up in the pit of my stomach as I entered the place. The filthy smells that struck my nose the moment I opened the door nearly made me gag. "Are you the Madam?" I asked the older woman that greeted me as I entered.

"That I am," she spoke firmly and confidently. She was obviously accustomed to dealing with embarrassed men and naive, nervous women. I was unfortunately swaying a bit too far towards the latter for my liking. "Uh, so... could you tell me a bit about this place?" "Certainly. This is the finest brothel in all of Tarant. Its appointments are refined, the atmosphere is relaxed, and I have gathered together the most exquisite women available for the use of our patrons." "Oh! That explains the lack of clothing..." I said sarcastically. *How could I not know this was a brothel? Really now.* I swallowed hard before continuing, "I'm looking for work..." Jayna squeaked and Virgil frowned at me.

She looks me up and down, calculating my worth...

"Hmm... I have a particular client... his taste is specific. You might be just the thing to satisfy it. The pay is generous... 500 coin. Would you be interested in servicing him?"

Unusual? I may not be as young as I once was, but that's insulting! I tried consoling myself by downplaying it in my mind. It couldn't be too bad, and it certainly wouldn't be the first time. *I don't have to do this. That was another time, another life. I'm not that desperate. All right, I am that desperate, but there has to be something else!* 300 was an awful lot of coins for such a simple job and I found it very difficult to refuse, despite my personal reservations. "300 coin? I'll do it."

"Very good. His name is Mr. Franklin. He lives on the corner of Vermillion and Crimson. He is not the most attractive man, but he is, shall we say, well-endowed... Do try and enjoy yourself. Come back

when you are finished, Samantha Colburn, and I will pay you."

Ugh, what a disgusting woman. Enjoy it? You've got to be kidding. I didn't say a word, I just turned around and walked straight out of that awful place. Virgil stood directly in front of me and took on a rather harsh tone, "Samantha, I will not stand for this. This has gone entirely too far..."

"Your opinion is noted, Virgil." I tried to brush him off.

"I don't think you're listening to what I'm saying. I won't let you go through with this. We have more important things to be doing, like tracking down the owner of the ring and meeting up with Elder Joachim." He was more pleading than admonishing at this point.

You're not making this any bloody easier. "It doesn't make me any happier than it does you, so if you've got any better ideas I'd love to hear them. Look at our equipment, Virgil, it's atrocious! How else are we going to purchase better weapons and armor, more salves, and more supplies? I don't see the Panarii coffers opening up to the Living One's aid, do you?"

That had been too harsh. "Very well." He stepped out of my way, staring at the ground. His voice was barely above a whisper. "I will speak no more of it. You can do whatever you like."

I started to walk towards Mr. Franklin's residence when Jayna finally spoke up, "No, I think you were right the first time, Virgil. This isn't Dernholm, we ought to be able to find plenty of honest jobs if we look a bit harder."

I continued walking as I chatted with her. It pained me to think of it, but it was time I told her outright. "Perhaps you should do just that, Jayna. You don't need to accompany me for this. Neither of you do, really, but least of all you Jayna. You've got plenty of places to study here in Tarant. You certainly don't need to hang around me any longer."

She looked down at the ground sadly, "No, I... I feel so lost here. I don't even know where I would go without you. I'm sorry, I didn't

mean to offend you."

I suddenly felt mean for even suggesting it, although it was exactly what I'd been trying to suggest for the past several days. Struggling with Jayna and with my own unwillingness to carry out the task at hand was too much to handle at one time so I decided to let Jayna tag along just a little while longer. "You've done no such thing, Jayna. I appreciate your concern."

I wanted to say more, to reassure her and put her mind at ease. Not just her, but Virgil as well who seemed thoroughly unhappy with the situation. Most of all I needed to reassure myself that somehow what I was doing was really necessary, and going through with it wouldn't be nearly as bad as my mind had built it up to be. *Why...? I thought I'd gotten away from this.*

The three of us arrived at Mr. Franklin's residence and I stopped briefly to tell the other two to go away for awhile. "Um... wait here if you must, but the Bridesdale is just across the street... you can wait in the comfort of our room." If I delayed any longer I felt I would be unable to force myself to go through with it. I knocked on the door and a half ogre servant let me in.

If you're trying so hard to protect me, Virgil, then I ought to do what I can... even if this is the only way I can be of any use. I stepped inside the house and spoke to the gnome in front of me, trying not to look directly at him. "Mr. Franklin?" I asked cautiously.

"Ooooooh! Are you the girl from Lil's?"

Wetting his lips with his tongue.

No... dammit, I made a promise! I promised myself it would never come to this again! "Uh... yeah," I managed to squeak out despite my nervousness. A war was waging in my head and it was all I could do to concentrate on the room around me.

"Oh my! What a find! What a find! Lil has done a marvelous job this time. We are going to have so much fun together!"

Rubbing his large rough palms together.

"Uh... just a minute..." My hands were quite literally shaking and I tried to think whatever it took to make them stop. *Virgil's doing what he can, I need to as well. This is nothing I haven't done dozens of times*

already, what's once more? I tried to reassure myself, to push down the feelings that I thought I'd left behind years ago. I was unfortunately just then realizing that feelings like that never go away no matter how much time passes.

"...Yes?" Mr. Franklin intoned impatiently, raising an eyebrow.

"Uh... never mind. Let's get started, shall we?" *It's only once more... just this one time... how can I refuse when Virgil and Jayna are counting on me? I'm the only one that can do this.*

"Ah... and so anxious!...Yes... Let's begin. Please... remove your clothing."

"Uh... okay Mister Franklin." I continued trembling and felt on the verge of tears, though it had little to do with the present. My mind was already wandering, already gone. Feelings from the past that I had tried to run away from came back to me in a huge rush. I began to sob lightly as I laid down, but I tried to hide it. I'd gotten quite good at hiding that sort of thing.

Along with the feelings of filth and hatred came disappointment; more with myself than anything else. I'd promised myself I would never return to a life where this was necessary and I not only broke that promise but I shattered it utterly. I felt weak and worthless. A few tears did escape and land softly on the pillow, but whether Mr. Franklin noticed I neither saw nor cared. It was then that I realized I could never really escape my former life no matter how hard I tried.

Discomfort overwhelmed me and I tried to focus on anything else that I could. As much as I felt my past was a burden I embraced it suddenly, trying to lose myself in it. It was the one thing I obsessed about more than anything else and I knew it would provide a more than ample distraction. Nervousness faded to depression and apprehension faded to apathy. I began to daydream of a distant past, recalling memories I had all but forgotten in the intervening years; memories that reminded me just how easy it is to repeat the mistakes of the past.

I was sitting in a dusty, dirty cell where I had been suffering for the last week. The guards had precious little sympathy for women and thieves, let alone both in one contemptuous little package. I refused

to eat, determined to end my own life in the most painful way possible, and they hardly cared. If I wanted to starve myself they were happy to let me.

I dimly heard a single set of footsteps coming down the hallway nearer to my cell. They were confident steps, and arrogant, not like the cautious steps that the guards made when they came to tease me and toss my dinner at me. The creaking of fine leather could be heard instead of the clanking of metal plate boots against stone. I looked up weakly through the rusted, iron bars to see the very man who had me sent to jail in the first place.

"Frederick," I hissed defiantly, "come to taunt me like the guards? Come to brag about how you're the one that finally caught the thieving whore plaguing Caladon these past months?"

"That does sound like it could be a good bit of fun," he remarked sarcastically, "but it would only serve me in the short term. Instead I'd prefer to make a deal. Surely you'd prefer a warm bed and a meal over continuing to starve yourself to death in this rotten prison? You look awful."

My stomach groaned hungrily thinking about what he said and my body shuddered against the cold, stone wall. "What could possibly make you want to let me out of here after all the misery I've caused?"

He scoffed, "You're the most naive prostitute I've ever had dealings with. Look, I'm certainly not going to visit you here to procure your services, especially not with you looking like that. So I'm looking to get you out of here, clean you up, and then the way I see it you'll owe me quite the debt of gratitude."

"There's no shortage of whores in Caladon," I spat, "why would you go to such trouble for this one? What kind of a life is it you think you're offering me?"

"Wealth and respect afford many luxuries, not the least of which is bizarre preferences for one whore over another. I may not be offering you the grand life you think you deserve, but it's better than death." There was a certain charm in his honesty that made me

responsive to his offer despite my complete and utter hatred of him.

"I'm just going to rob you again and take off when you least expect it."

"We'll see about that." He smirked at me knowingly before turning and calling out to the guards. "Let her loose! I'll be taking her with me."

Slowly the memory faded and I grew more and more aware of my surroundings. I was still in Mr. Franklin's house, with no idea of how much time had passed. My dress was lying on the floor next to the bed where I had left it. The almost overpowering scent of a cigar was trying and failing to mask the scent of sweat that befouled the room. Sighing contentedly.

"No more, child. Three times is enough for any man. You roused quite an animal in me. Return yourself to Lil. You've done an excellent job. Goodbye."

It's finally over. There's no more reason to be polite. "Ugh! You pig! I'm leaving alright... to bathe!" *Thank the gods it's finally over.* I picked up my dress and hastily tossed it on.

Waving his hand in dismissal.

"No... no more of your frisky tantrums. I'm tired. Goodbye."

"Augh!" I shouted, storming out of the room and the house. Virgil and Jayna were still waiting outside. Virgil looked up at me, sighing sadly, and Jayna simply stared at the ground. Tears formed in my eyes, gently dropping to the ground. It was my turn to speak so softly that they could barely hear, "I should've listened to you." *It's over now, and I'll never need to do it again. Just this once, this coin is enough to get me started on building back what I had.*

It struck me, then, what Virgil had said shortly after we first arrived in Tarant. *"The free man is defined by what he does today. I'll look no more behind me..."* There was more to Joachim than I really gave credit for. Virgil was trying to be a true friend to me in taking me to meet him, and I was being an irrational fool in expecting the worst.

Wordlessly, Virgil and Jayna escorted me across the street to the Bridesdale. Jayna kept me company while Virgil drew up a hot bath.

I sat alone in that bath for hours upon hours, until night fell and the room grew black. The water was almost freezing cold by the time I got out and my fingers were so shriveled I could scarcely even open the door to let myself out. I slept a dreamless sleep, thankful that my mind finally allowed me to rest.

I visited Madam Lil first thing in the morning to collect on the payment I had most certainly earned twice over and then some. "I've seen to Mr. Franklin." My voice cut through the air like steel.

"Very good. He was very pleased with your performance... I hope the experience was somewhat enjoyable for you as well. Here is the coin I promised. Thank you."

"No, it most assuredly was not. In fact, I think 300 coin is not nearly enough for what I've gone through." My eyes met hers and we stared at each other fiercely.

Finally, she turned her head slightly and gave me a shrewd look, "If you want more coin you're going to have to earn it."

"I'll not be doing any servicing any more, no matter the price. If you've got other work for me, then perhaps we can come to an agreement."

"Hmm... Let me think."

She pauses for a moment.

"Ah yes, I know just the thing. We have a particular patron who's been quite negligent in his payments of late. If you could persuade him to pay his debt, I'll pay you coin, or a girl, whichever you prefer."

A girl? You think because I didn't enjoy Mr. Franklin that I would prefer a girl? I was insulted, but insults were preferable to prostitution. "No problem. Where can I find him?"

"His name is Mr. Langley. He's the doorman over at the Bridesdale Inn. He has run up a debt of 400 coin on his tab with us and made no attempt to pay it. Please see that he does. But mind you, don't hurt him. We don't want to damage the patrons..."

Well, at least he'll be easy to find. "I'll get on it right away." Perhaps the Madam wasn't as bad as I thought, just a bit on the eccentric side. There was no cause to delay in the task I'd been given since more funds would mean I could be a bit more spendy when I finally went

shopping, so I paid Mr. Langley a visit.

"Madam Lil sent me to speak with you..."

Looking guilty.

"I know... I know... I owe her so many coins."

Frustrated.

"Those damnable girls! I can't keep myself away! Willow... she's simply incredible. I don't know what I'm going to do."

Your reprehensible behavior only perpetuates the downward spiral of that poor girl's self esteem. "She wants her 400 coin. She says it's bad business to let it slide."

"I haven't got it. This job"

He motions back towards the inn

"hardly pays enough coin to keep me housed, let alone support my... hobbies."

He thinks for a moment.

"I can spare 100 coin right now, but I do not have the rest."

"I doubt she will be happy with half. Do you need some incentive?" It was as though he represented every man that had ever grabbed me inappropriately, or paid me a pittance for degrading myself for cheap thrills. A part of me wanted to stab him good and proper, but I knew it wouldn't change how I felt. Violence never made me feel any better.

Paling.

"I'm sorry! All I have right now is the 100 coin. But wait! The Bridesdale will pay me again in 5 days. If you come back then, I will give you the entire amount!"

Whining slightly.

"That is the best I can do."

If I leave you with money it'll be gone by the time you get your next payment. "I don't trust you, Langley..."

Looking worried.

"Listen... I'm good for it. You can trust me. How about this? As proof of my good intentions, I will give you the 100 now. Then come back in 5 days and I will give you the rest. It's the best I can do..."

It wasn't worth hurting him over. "It will have to do. I'll be back for the rest." I took the coins from him and thought for awhile, traveling down Vermillion Road as I did so. *5 days... it'll take just a bit longer*

than that to travel out to Shrouded Hills from here and sell off this useless mine deed. I can collect my payment from Jongle Dunne, too.

I stopped just short of the entrance to Tarant, certain of what I was about to do but dreading it all the same. *Jayna... I'm so very sorry, but this is goodbye. I can't take you with me.*

Chapter the Twenty First:

Saying Goodbye Is Never Easy

I turned to Jayna slowly and sadly, looking up at her for a few short seconds before turning away again. "Jayna..." *Run away from me while you still can, don't let me ruin you.*

"What can I do for you?"

"I'd like you to do something for me, Jayna..." No matter how many times I'd told her all of this in my mind it still didn't get any easier to say. I was clearly avoiding saying it, if only because I couldn't bear to say goodbye. *Perhaps I'm just being selfish. I'm sure I would've sent you off long ago if you didn't remind me of Nathaniel every time I looked at you.*

I swallowed hard, trying to get out what had to be said quickly. "I think you'd best leave the group." *There, I said it. Please don't hate me, Jayna.*

She seemed more confused than anything, a frown slowly forming on her face, "What? Why? I want to stay with you! I want to learn together!"

"That's not it, Jayna... I'd love for you to stay with me, but I can't in good conscience let you do that. I'm only holding you back. You're in Tarant now, you can get all the technical knowledge you ever wanted to know... it's not like Dernholm. I have to leave here for a while, though, and you won't have the same luxury if you stick by me." *More than just a reminder, you've been a wonderful friend. I'm going to miss you.* I felt tears coming dangerously close to surfacing, but I held them back. If I started crying I knew Jayna would as well.

"Oh."

She seems very sad, a little frightened.

"Well.....I'm sure I'll find something to do around here. Goodbye...."
I wanted to protest, to reassure her that everything would be all right

even after I'd gone, but that would only reinforce her weakness... her attachment to me. "Goodbye. Perhaps we'll see each other again when I return." That was it, that was all I could say. With the paper seller shouting news of my survival at the top of his lungs for all to hear I had no time to waste in getting the hell out of there. If I hadn't already wanted to leave for more personal reasons, now more than ever I truly had to leave.

I crossed over the bridge leading through the boil, the filthy and run-down section of Tarant where all of the worst thugs hung out. It was on the outskirts of town and the guards didn't dare to try and enforce law there, they merely guarded people like me who only needed to pass through to get out of Tarant. As I left, the darkened skies finally opened up and rain began pouring down upon me. It was cold, almost frozen, and I began to shiver. I wouldn't turn back, though, I couldn't bear to. I continued on towards Shrouded Hills.



The journey was an uneventful one, abnormally quiet for both Virgil and myself. My mind drifted between Jayna and Nathaniel. Now that I'd forced Jayna out of my life before she was ready, she shared that much more in common with Nathaniel. *Am I really any better of a person than I was when I left? Will I ever stop making these same mistakes? Jayna... be strong, you really are better off without me.*

It took well over a day before the weather finally cleared up and I just knew I was going to fall dreadfully sick before I could make it back to anywhere civilized. Shrouded Hills didn't count as civilized. *Hah, I'll be lucky if anybody there even sells the materials to make a few salves... oh, I never did learn how to make salves... I suppose those materials wouldn't do me any good anyway...* I sighed, sniffing quietly as we continued. Eventually we did reach Shrouded Hills.

I received very few recognized stares as I wandered back into town, most people having forgotten my past misdeeds already. I didn't care to stay long enough to test that theory, so I was all business. I first stopped by Jingle Dunne's shop to deliver his long overdue package.

"Good day, Mr. Dunne. I've brought back your package."

"Thank you so much, I really appreciate it! Someday you'll be able to look back and say that you helped the man who changed the course of our history!"

I bet. Why, Shrouded Hills might even show up on a map! "Fascinating. Perhaps you could share the secret with me?" It was hard to mask my sarcasm so as not to overly offend the poor sod.

"Sorry madam, but this secret stays with me. I do thank you, though. And I wish you the best of luck in your travels..."

I thought not. Why do I suspect his 'secret' is nothing more than a potion to cure an embarrassing skin disease? "Goodbye, Mr. Dunne. May you be well." I had been in town for no longer than ten minutes and I was already halfway done. There wasn't any compelling reason to stay any longer than I had to. In fact, sleeping amidst the wilderness half a day's away from town seemed like a much better idea than sleeping in a warm inn room at Shrouded Hills.

The afternoon sun nearly blinded me as I traveled past the farm and towards old Bessie Toone, stopping when I reached Percy's house. I let myself in, suspecting his ogre guard to be just another one of those decorative ogres I seemed to have been encountering. "I got your mine back, and I expect my payment right quick Mr. Toone." I handed him the deed.

"Oh, thank you, thank you, thank you! Now that the mine is back in the family, perhaps my mother's ghost will finally be at rest... and I can sell the mine again. It should bring a fine bit of coin now that she's gone. I wonder..."

"Excuse me, you owe me some money? I care not for your financial troubles." *Hmph. Selling it off again right quick. You really are a bastard.*

He shifted uncomfortably, nervously glancing about the room. "Oh... yes... what was it, 300 coins?"

I started tapping my foot and placed my hand on my dagger almost unconsciously. "No, it was 500." *Don't make me get mean about it. I am NOT taking a loss on this blasted thing.*

He looks upset.

"Okay. If I must. Here it is."

"Thank you. Pleasure doing business." *What a rotten, cowardly cheapskate you are. I hope your mother's ghost haunts you in your sleep then kills you for what you've done.* The Toone family business wasn't my problem. I had collected what was owed to me and that's as far as my involvement had to go.

Virgil and I left Shrouded Hills without even staying the night. We traveled beneath scattered clouds in the open skies for days on our way back to Tarant. I still thought frequently of Jayna, and I surely missed her company, but I was utterly convinced things were better this way. My wistful emotions were just rewards for having dragged her all over with me before cutting her loose. My reverie was rather suddenly interrupted by a mysterious trio.

"It looks like this is the end for you... no one escapes the Molochean Hand. It would have been better for you if you had not survived the crash of the Zephyr."

Damnation! I never should've gone back to Shrouded Hills, now they've found me again! "I don't know what you are talking about." *I really don't think I can lie my way out of this one, but damn if I'm not going to try.*

"So you are going to try to weasel your way out of this? After the coward you are! Perhaps you shouldn't have shot your mouth off to the newspapers: "Sole Blimp Crash Survivor?"

All right. This one's my fault. Damnation! Can you at least not hurt Virgil while I'm stabbing you to death? "Please, don't kill me!" I didn't figure the assassins would have a soft spot, actually rather the opposite. If they regarded me lowly enough they might focus on killing me instead of hurting Virgil.

The man who had been speaking leapt forward, shouting "You will die like the coward you are!" *I may well and truly be a coward, but I'm a coward that knows more than just a bit about stabbing you in all the right places.*

One by one I whirled around my attackers, taking each of them down in turn. I stepped up close behind them, close enough for them to feel my breath on the backs of their necks and for me to hear their shocked gasps as my dagger found its new home. It was a macabre

dance that I loathed getting involved in, but when the blades came out my instincts took over. If it was to be either me or them, my choice was clear. One of them did manage to graze me with a blade once, but thankfully Virgil remained unharmed.

"Well, that confirms it," I said to Virgil, "These assassins that are after me have been after me since the blimp crash and they're a part of this Molochean Hand group. Have you ever heard of them?"

Virgil sounded completely irritated, "You know, you could've avoided this if you hadn't gone and run your mouth off to that paper." I couldn't blame him for being upset, I would've been just as angry if he'd done the same thing and I wasn't even trying to protect him. Well, in a sense I was, but not the same way he was trying to protect me. It was complicated.

"You needn't remind me. All I'm saying is that the Molochean Hand isn't a group I'm overly familiar with. They're either very well hidden, or very old indeed. I'm sure I'd know something about them otherwise." *One of these days I need to learn how to properly apologize instead of changing the subject.*

Virgil thought about what I said in silence as we finished up the remainder of our journey to Tarant. The smokey gray clouds that perpetually hung over Tarant were visible from over a day outside of the city itself. It was truly filthy.

I searched all over the place for Jayna when we arrived, wanting to simply chat with her if nothing else. I was concerned with how she was doing, but unfortunately I could not find her anywhere no matter how hard I looked. *Perhaps it's better this way anyway... she's better off not knowing me.* I was saddened, but at the same time I realized I was free to do the one thing I'd been holding myself back from doing since arriving. After putting up with the insults and mockery of the upper class, after killing scores of rats and tromping around through sewers, after degrading myself for a perverted gnome and an eccentric Madam it was finally time to swindle, steal, and pilfer to my heart's content.

Oh yes, Tarant, it's time to pay and I'm not taking 'no' for an answer. I

tried to be a good person, I really did, but that only saw me attacked by assassins and violated by a disgusting little gnome. Look out, Tarant, this time I won't be so nice. I started my crime spree where it was easiest and most legal.

"The Dragon Knights hail from..."

I traveled all around town, stopping by bars just long enough to swindle the foolish drunks inside. I made at least 1500 coins at each bar and there were no less than three throughout the city. It was truly distressing just how easily I could make money when I decided I was done playing the kindhearted adventurer. I secretly resolved never to hold myself back again. I knew where it would lead me and that wasn't a path I was ever going to go down again.

"If a man wanted to be a mage, where would he go?"

I picked pockets and forced my way into shops where I relieved more than a few of their wares, then sold the items I didn't need to the local gypsy or junk dealer. I plied my trade expertly, racking up thousands of coins in mere days. I was certain my behavior was irking the local thieves, but I hadn't seen any kind of friendly invitation from them and I was really quite tired of waiting. There wasn't an upper class house in the city that I hadn't broken into by the end of the week.

The shopkeepers, despite missing a few of their more expensive wares, were more than happy to try and recoup what they'd lost by selling to me at a discount. As far as they knew my coin was as good as anybody else's and I wasn't going to do anything for them to suspect otherwise. I even bought a lifetime membership to the library, but the technical manuals still seemed a bit excessively priced. I snuck into the university late one night and pilfered an entire shelf of them while the salesman wasn't around.

After weeks of tromping through filth and doing difficult favors for the cheapest and least appreciative buggers imaginable, the week following my return to Tarant was glorious. Although Virgil clearly didn't approve of my excesses, even he had to smile and laugh at how easily I ripped off those who had wronged me. That filthy gnome... oh, especially that filthy gnome... he no longer even had two coins to rub together. I heard his ogre guard had to be put down after rebelling in response to his salary going unpaid for nearly two weeks. Mr. Franklin, on the other hand, was unable to entirely escape his

ogre guard's ire without injury. It was perfect.

I had a sudden realization towards the end of my crime spree when I targeted a lone jewelry shop in a back alleyway and noticed the sign read, 'P. Schuyler & Sons.' *The ring! I still haven't tracked down the owner to this ring!* I'd been so focused on revenge and profit that I nearly completely forgot about my entire reason to be in Tarant in the first place. There was a dwarf hanging around suspiciously outside of the shop so I made friendly chatter with him before going inside. "I don't believe we've met, good sir. What's your name?"

"And who might you be to ask a dwarf his name? Bloody ignorant outlander, I'd say. As if a dwarf would give his name away!"

What in the gods? Rude little bastard, isn't he? "Forgive me. I wasn't aware it was such-"

"Excuse me. You don't need to take such treatment from this dwarf. Bloody poseur, annoying little runt, if you ask me."

"Your opinion has been noted, Virgil..." then, more quietly, "I happen to agree, but you don't get anywhere if you act like... well, if you act like this damned dwarf is. Let's just be nice and see where it gets us." He nodded, winking at me for a brief second before speaking up.

"I mean, look at him! Putting on airs like he's some sort of native dwarf... I'd be surprised if he's ever been out of the city in his entire life. You can always smell a city dwarf a mile away. He's probably got a manicure. His beard looks a bit straggly, too. Probably out past his bed time."

I admonished him loudly and dramatically. I was a terrible actor, but I suspected the dwarf too self-centered to notice. "Enough, Virgil!" I turned around with a "Hmph," staring back at the dwarf, "Now what seems to be the problem, sir...?"

"I was saying that it was bloody rude of you to be asking a dwarf for his name. It's not something to be thrown out and away like today's rubbish."

"Ah, right. Of course. Forgive me, I wasn't aware it was such a breach in etiquette." *...and even if I were aware, I'd probably still ask just to get under your skin for making such a big deal of it.*

"Hmm. I suppose you're not to blame, stranger. Perhaps I'm a little quick-tempered myself. Please, forgive my harsh words. You may call me Magnus."

So there are manners hidden underneath that stubby, arrogant exterior. "A pleasure, sir. What were you saying about a dwarf's name?"

"Well, dwarves are an ancient race... our traditions run deep. A dwarf's TRUE name, his family name, is a sacred thing, a thing of mystery and power. Magnus is my common name. If I knew you well, I'd tell you my full name. But Magnus will do for now."

"Why are you so protective of your family name?" *Just what I bloody need, a dwarven history lesson.*

"Dwarven names are symbolic, a reflection of our history. Any dwarf who gives his name away has no respect for that history."

"I see. Thank you for the lesson, Magnus." I half expected him to launch into another tirade now that I'd been the one to speak his name, assuming that was probably yet another offense.

"It is nice to meet a dwarf who at least stands for his ancestors' ways. Well met, friend. Now, how can I help you?"

I was actually surprised he didn't seem upset. He acted as though the next bloody wind that blew through the alley would upset him.

"Certainly, Magnus. I wanted to ask if you might know anything about this establishment here?"

"Yes, I do. And I gaze each day in a fury across at the devils who own it. Ugly bastards they are; heaven knows what goes on behind those doors. The building is the headquarters for the infamous P. Schuyler & Sons."

"If you curse it so much, then why are you loitering outside of this store?"

He glared at me angrily. I supposed I'd touched another nerve. "I might ask you the same. You seem awfully curious about P. Schuyler & Sons. What brings YOU here?"

Arrogant, self-important... "I'm investigating a ring sold by this establishment."

"Interesting. I too am investigating one of their products. I saw it for sale in a pawn shop down in the merchant's quarter, and it had their imprint. Would you like to see it?"

"Yes, very much so." It was a longshot, but I hoped it would have something in common with the ring I was investigating. It was a dirty, dusty old bronze bracelet with 'P. Schuyler & Sons' lightly imprinted upon it. There were also some faded, barely visible carvings along its surface. "What are these carvings?" I asked. "I can't quite make them out..."

"Don't you see? There... a cross... there... symbols! All of these

symbols! All of these ancient characters, symbols of a lost language? These belong to my people's history! These are stories for the dwarves..."

Pompous, all-knowing... "What do you think is significant about this bracelet?"

"Do you see these dwarven amulets I wear?"

He shows them to me.

"They were given to me by my grandfather, who in turn received them from his. Do you see the symbol carved on them? Same as the symbol carved on the bracelet! These gauntlets are the last link I possess to my ancestors, handed down in my family since before any of us can remember."

It seemed like quite the long shot even by my standards, and I was beginning to entertain the possibility that I might actually be the Living One. "Have you spoken with P. Schuyler & Sons about it?"

"That, my friend, is the point of the whole story. I've tried on multiple occasions to speak with the Schuylers concerning this bracelet and where they got it, but I've been stonewalled by employees from the very beginning. They're hiding something! I know it!"

Childish, rude... "What could they possibly be trying to conceal?"

"The sources behind their inventory, the reasons for their reclusiveness... who knows? But I do know that I'm going to find out where they got this bracelet regardless of what is necessary to do so." I was clearly not fond of the damned dwarf, but on the other hand I figured I might be able to use him. Dwarves were supposed to be talented mechanics and I had just recently acquired a pile of technical manuals. Aside from that, an extra sword arm never hurts.

"I see. Well, perhaps we could work together?"

"Hmmm. Perhaps. I do see some potential in you, my friend, and you seem trustworthy. Done! Let us proceed and throw some light on this mystery."

"Well said. Good to have you aboard, Magnus." *By not many of the usual definitions of the word 'good'. I hope you don't expect me to start behaving on your account.*

Chapter the Twenty Second: The Benefits of Dwarven Companionship

Magnus following along, I stepped inside of P. Schuyler & Sons to address the employee manning the front. I figured I had a better chance at persuading the good fellow to answer my questions than old Magnus did. That damned dwarf didn't strike me as the persuasive (or likable) sort, and I imagined he'd been even more of a pain to the poor employee than he had been to me when I mistakenly asked him for a bloody introduction. Unfortunately, it seemed as though Magnus had made enough of a nuisance of himself that the employee glared at ME just for having him in my company.

"Hello. Welcome to P. Schuyler & Sons, dealers in the rare and beautiful. My name is James Kingsford. How might I help you?"

"Hello, Mr. Kingsford. I'd like to talk to someone about a ring I... er... used to have." *The assassins are on my trail again... I can't trust just anybody.*

He looked confused. "What exactly can I help you with? Did you purchase the ring from P. Schuyler & Sons?"

"Uh, well, no... I was given the ring by... uhh... someone..."

Damnation! I sound like a blabbering fool! I really should've put more thought into this before just brazenly wandering in.

"I'm very sorry, but we don't guarantee the quality of our products unless they were purchased directly from us. Now, if there's nothing else, I really must get back to work..."

This was getting nowhere fast. "No, you don't understand. Perhaps if I spoke to Mr. Schuyler?" I tried turning on the charm, but he ultimately didn't seem to care. He was too accustomed to dealing with Magnus and was deflecting me without even hearing a word I had to say.

"I'm afraid that's quite impossible. The Schuylers are extremely busy men, and I KNOW they can't be bothered with something as trivial as your concerns with a product you didn't even buy..."

Don't you dare just brush me aside, mister. I will be speaking with Mr. Schuyler one way or another, I assure you. "But wait! I just need to find out who..."

"I'm so very glad you stopped by, though. Feel free to browse the store if you'd like. Have a good day..."

I growled under my breath and stormed out of the shop. *Hmm... I'll have to come back later when he's gone. I'll be getting in there for sure, but I'd rather not be caught.* "Say, Magnus, do you know anything about smithing?" I asked as casually as possible.

"Do I?!" he gloated, "Why, my father was a smith, as was his father and his father's father! My family's craft can be seen in weapons and armor dating back to well over 400 years ago!" Magnus continued blabbering on for what felt like at least an hour before he finally decided to shut up. "So, yes, you could say I know a thing or two about smithing."

"Care to pore over a few schematics with me, then? I bet if we put our talents together we could build quite a useful set of armaments."

"That sounds positively lovely. Though, uh... I would like to be investigating the Schuylers as soon as possible, eh?"

"Not a problem, good sir. I was planning on returning later this evening when the employee there is perhaps... less present." I dragged Magnus back towards the hotel room where I was storing all of my technical manuals. It seemed like after over a week back in town Mr. Langley finally had returned to work. I was beginning to think he was avoiding me. "I've come for the coin, Ronald..."

"Here, see... I told you I was a man of my word."

He hands me the coin.

"Please give Madam Lil my regards. Assure her that I will come with coin from this point forward. Only one more week... one more week and I can see Willow again."

He seems to remember himself.

"Oh! I beg your pardon, madam."

Filthy little rat. "Thank you, Ronald. I will deliver this to Madam Lil.

Goodbye." I strolled inside, pulling out a few relevant technical manuals and discussing them at length with Magnus. He seemed impressed with the depth of my technical knowledge and I had to admit he wasn't too shabby himself. He could craft a sturdy blade, that was for sure.

We worked together for hours and hours until the sun had very nearly set. First I had Magnus fine tune a suit of plate armor I purchased at the local smith's, then I set to fastening an electrical harness about it in order to absorb any electrical current it came in contact with. In this age of technology wearing big metal plates is foolish unless you're prepared to deal with enemies of a technological nature. I gave my masterpiece to Virgil as a thanks for trying to protect me.

Magnus was so enthralled with my electrical talents that he had me do something similar with a few shields for the three of us, though I made those to repel things of a more magickal nature. Things seemed to be going well. We needed more parts, so the three of us wandered out to the local shops and picked up the few things we could find. While we were out I decided to pay Madam Lil a visit and hand her what I owed her. "I've got the coin from Mr. Langley." The smell in her brothel was nauseating as always.

"Thank you, Samantha Colburn."

He takes the coin from me.

"Would you prefer a girl, or the coin?"

So that hadn't been a joke after all. Ugh. "The coin, please, and also any more jobs you might have like this one."

She thought about it very carefully, staring off into space as she considered exactly what she thought I might be capable of. "Do you know what I'd really like?"

As long as it doesn't involve removing my clothes again, you name it.

"What?"

In hushed tones.

"A Medallion of Beauty! They're very rare and difficult to come by... elvish magic, you know. You get me one, and I'll give you your choice... coin or two girls! That would be an adventurous tryst... whichever you prefer. What do you think?"

I do suspect this Madam is something of a pervert. "I'll do it for the coin. If I see one I'll be sure to snag it for you."

"Wonderful! I do look forward to it." *Whatever catches your fancy, as long as I get the gold I hardly care.* While we were over in the seedier area of town I was struck with a sudden urge to test out the new toys that Magnus and I had been putting together. I figured that one warehouse was probably as good as the next, so I crept over to a nearby warehouse and sprung the lock with ease. It happened to be immediately next to Mr. Plough's warehouse, so my searching was developing something of a pattern.

"Excuse me," Magnus started indignantly, "Just what is it do you think that you're doing?"

"Hm? I'm going to see what's inside this warehouse. We've still got a bit of time to kill." *Don't you start with me, dammit.*

He scoffed loudly and crossed his arms, "Not with me here to stop you, you aren't. That warehouse doesn't belong to you and you'd better be keeping your hands off of it. I'll not be associating myself with a damned thief."

Put a sock in it, dwarf. "Come now, we were just starting to get to know each other. You don't expect I'd be able to sneak us into P. Schuyler & Sons without a bit of lockpicking, now do you? It just so happens that while we both need to get into there, I also have need of getting in here. I'm trying to track down a missing set of skulls that's been stolen straight from the mausoleum where they were interred. I just want to put them back."

He arched an eyebrow at my fumbled attempts to explain. "Alright, fair enough. I'll go with you just this once, but you'd better be on your best behavior around me. I'll not have you tarnishing my name nor the name of my clan."

Whatever, dwarf. If you don't like it you can leave. I pushed open the newly unlocked warehouse door and crept inside quietly. Virgil, on the other hand, wasn't quite used to traipsing about in plate and he made quite the ruckus as he entered. An ogre guard rushed at us

angrily. I stepped to the side and let him charge past me, slipping my dagger between his shoulder blades when the opportunity presented itself. He fell to the ground with a loud thud. *I guess these ogre guards aren't quite so fearsome after all.*

Magnus was glaring at me. "What? He attacked us!" He only sighed. I was determined to ignore him and I went about searching the crates and boxes stacked about the warehouse.

First try... of all the damned luck... I guess things are looking up after all. "Aha! Found 'em!" I called out, plucking the pair of skulls from a box in the middle of a rather large stack of them. "You've no idea how long I've been looking for these."

"Can we get back to our work, then?" Magnus asked pitifully.

"Certainly, I just have to deliver these to Benjamin the Phrenologist."

"I won't ask." Magnus spat.

The sun had almost entirely set by the time I reached the university district. It was nearly blinding the way it sat on the horizon, making it impossibly difficult to read address numbers. Luckily I recognized the building (it was the same one I had to go to when I wanted to steal more technical manuals). "Good evening, Benjamin. I've procured those skulls you were asking for, but there's something you might need to know..."

"What about? Please give me the skulls, I need to have them. My reputation could be made by studying them!"

"You don't understand. It is dangerous to have these skulls." *Fair warning and all. I almost got killed three times just finding the damned things.*

"I do not care!" he shouted excitedly, "I will pay you double my original offer! 200 coins!"

"Well, in that case, here you are." *It's not like I'm going to let you keep them anyway, I might as well take what I can get.*

"Splendid! Here's your payment. I'm going to commence my research

right away! Thank you so much for your help."

"It was no trouble at all, sir." ...*and it will be even less trouble to take those back from you and give them to Cesare.*

He set the skulls down on the table and turned his attention towards a shelf that he began pulling books and assorted tools off of. I took the opportunity to snatch the skulls right quickly stuffing them in my purse. Magnus looked at me with wide eyes, puffing out his chest and holding his hands up in the air as if to say, "I cannot believe you would do such a thing!" *Believe it.*

Once we were outside the dwarf nearly exploded, "This is unacceptable! You just sold those skulls and then stole them right back! That's terribly dishonest!"

We continued walking as we talked. "I tried to tell him the skulls were dangerous. Don't you see, by taking them I'm protecting him from the fate that would surely befall him if he kept them." I bit my lip. I wasn't sure whether Magnus would believe this or not.

"Then why in Alberich's name did you even bring him the skulls in the first place?" He was good and angry about the whole matter. I didn't rightly see what business of his it was or why he cared so damned much.

"I am a woman of my word. I told him I would get the skulls for him, and I did. I only learned after accepting that they were as dangerous as they are. I was almost killed trying to acquire them! Look, Matt is over on that corner there. He's the one who told me the skulls were dangerous in the first place." I walked up to him, pulling the skulls out of my purse and handing them to him, "I've brought you the skulls." Magnus glared at me, crossing his arms and tapping his foot.

"Excellent! This is the break we've been looking for." He seemed very pleased.

"You were going to tell me what was going on here, now?" Magnus was silently fuming and I was hoping the explanation would calm him down for at least awhile. *You and I are not going to get along in the long term, dwarf, not at all.*

Matt began his little speech. "I can tell you what I know, and a man named Arthur Tyron can fill you in on the rest."

"Some years ago, bizarre breeding experiments were begun in secret which would eventually affect the balance of power. We were the first viable offspring produced by these experiments. Their skulls are the evidence we are gathering to expose them all!"

It was terribly silly, but I had to admit it was also fascinating. I was certainly curious enough to continue with it for awhile. "Who is doing this? What was the purpose of these experiments?"

"I have told you all I dare. Tyron can fill you in on the rest. I need you to bring him the skulls if you would. It would be far too dangerous for me to search for him."

I stuffed the skulls securely back into my purse. "Okay, I'll do it. You've piqued my curiosity."

"Good!" Matt clapped me gently on the shoulder, "He was in Black Root, last I knew. Perhaps you can still find him there."

"I will do so as soon as I am able." *I have business in Black Root anyway, I need only finish up here.* "Take care of yourself, Matt." He nodded and then crossed the street, disappearing around a building.

I glared at Magnus. "See?"

He sighed indignantly. "We've still got work to do."

He was right. Using the parts we'd scrounged up Magnus and I got back to work, putting together all manner of tools, toys, and weaponry. My favorite was a dagger powered by a thick spring mechanism to add just that extra bit of force when stabbing. It seemed like it would come in handy, so I pocketed it.

By the time we were done the sun had finished setting over an hour prior and I figured it was time to sneak into the Schuylers shop. I cautiously made my way back to the isolated alleyway where the entrance was and peeked inside. Much to my surprise the employee was still sitting there behind the desk, shuffling through some papers. I hastily closed the door and stared around the alleyway with wide eyes.

Oh now that bloody does it. Magnus gave me a hard look as if to say, 'You'd better do something about this and soon.' I cast several glances up and down the alleyway until my eyes found a local wino. I approached him with a smile, "Good sir, I would like to make you an offer. I will give you this bottle of wine," I pulled a bottle out of my purse, "and in exchange I would like you to go inside the store there and inquire about purchasing a necklace."

The wino thought about it for all of three seconds before grabbing onto the bottle of wine, "Sounds good, lady. Thanks!" I waited about a minute until I could hear the clerk's pained voice carrying on with the clearly clueless wino. I slipped inside, motioning for the other two to follow quietly. I slid open the lock on the inner door, the employee none the wiser, and quietly entered.

Although the room seemed odd in many ways, the most unusual thing about it was the giant stone pedestal with some kind of thick tome on it. It didn't seem to be exactly normal fare for a jewelry shop. With Magnus and Virgil's help I grabbed ahold of it and quietly slid it aside, revealing a trap door underneath. *Suspicious, indeed.* We ventured downward.

"Look! It's an ancient burial ground!"

The room below smelled of freshly turned earth and rotting flesh. I could tell what was about to happen even before it took place. As soon as our boots touched the loose dirt that made up the cavern floor a low moaning issued throughout the room. Piles of dirt began to form and rotting appendages clawed their way out of them, full zombies emerging to shamble towards us hungrily.

If anything they seemed even less resilient to a good, thorough stabbing so I got to work. A couple of animated dead certainly weren't going to stop me from finding out what I needed to know. It was utterly grotesque and the smell made me gag more than a few times, but I much preferred it to other things I could be doing. *Never again, Mr. Franklin. Never again.*

The torrent of zombies was nearly endless. They clawed their way out of the ground four and five at a time, groaning and wailing as they tried unsuccessfully to attack us. Magnus, Virgil, and I tore through

them with ease using the new weapons Magnus and I had crafted together. *I'm glad I decided to come prepared after all. Here I was beginning to suspect myself as paranoid as Cesare.*

The three of us descended to yet another level below the inconspicuous Schuyler storefront, unsure of what further horrors to expect as we continued. The only horror immediately visible upon climbing down the ladder, however, was the atrocious, shabby stonework. It seemed that even the cavern leading into this area had been of better stonework, although the rough cracked walls we now found ourselves around were at least flat... mostly.

We turned the nearby corner and were confronted with even more zombies, though these zombies weren't nearly as aggressive. The corpses were still dwarven, but barely. Their limbs were oversized as were their heads, and their foreheads especially seemed to be exceptionally large.

"Gods! They're using dwarven zombies to do this grisly work! These truly are my lost people, and their resting place has been desecrated!" *You've got to be kidding me.* "Magnus... are you sure? These dwarves look strange..."

"Yes... I agree. And I wish you'd stop going on about it. Magnus, look at these dwarves... even for the undead, there's something off. And the stonework in this tomb is atrocious! I'm not one to profane the dead, but I'd never claim these oddities as my lost people..."

"You've got a point, Virgil..." *Thanks for backing me up on this one. Glad I wasn't the only one to think that.*

"What? Who are you to make any judgments about dwarven stonework? You're not even a dwarf! And you're bloody stupid as well! Primitive dwarves... bah!"

'oh, and by the way, you're stupid'. Magnus, you've really got a lot to learn about insults. Perhaps I should introduce you to Sammie. I would be happy to provide such an introduction, but I've got a lot more to lose than I did last time. "I don't know, Magnus... there's something strange about them..."

"Strange? Of course they look strange. They've been raised from the dead to work as mindless laborers! You'd look strange too if someone did the same to you! When I find out who's responsible, there's a price that's going to be paid."

"Let's find out what's going on here, first..." *I'll be damned if I let you*

ruin my last remaining lead on what the hell to do with this ring, even if it's your lost clan being desecrated here. Besides, undead don't get misshapen like this... they just sort of rot. I've read books.

*"Do what you will. I'm going to do whatever I feel is necessary."
Damnation! This is not going to end well.* I turned towards the only remaining room yet to explore and began heading in that direction.

Chapter the Twenty Third: The Drawbacks of Dwarven Companionship

I crept into the next room, bypassing the disturbing dwarven undead mindlessly going about their designated tasks. At least they weren't trying to gnaw a hole in my dress, I had to give them credit for that. Three men glared at me in shock when I entered the room. *Oh hell. I really ought to have been paying more attention. Damn you, Magnus! Ugh... no sense hiding now.* I walked straight up to them.

"What? Who are you to trespass in the halls of our business establishment? Identify yourself immediately!"

"Forgive the intrusion, but I'm in dire need of some information." It didn't really sound like a particularly convincing thing to be saying after trudging through a crypt full of angry zombies, but you never got anywhere without being polite. *Polite? I've just broken into their home and attacked their workers and I'm trying to be polite?*

"Information?!" he shouted. "You've violated our home and our business out of the need for some information? That's utterly preposterous!" *You know, I was just beginning to think the same thing*

I really couldn't blame him for getting so angry. "I can assure you that it's of the utmost importance."

"I'll be the judge of what's important in my own home! What could you possibly need to know that justifies this outrage?"

Oh are you ever not going to like this... "I need to find out the identity of one of your clients..."

"Impossible! Even if you were here on legitimate business, we at P. Schuyler & Sons would never betray the confidentiality of our clients! To even think such a thing is sheer madness."

I sighed regretfully. I had been trying so hard to save my trump card, and now I had to waste it. "Listen, I'm not here to make trouble, but I

HAVE seen a lot..."

His tone changed immediately and he rethought his opinion of me. "Yeesss, you have, haven't you? You've got me in quite a predicament. I suppose there's something to be said for making the best out of a bad situation. And you are persistent, I'll give you that..."

I grinned smugly. "A true predicament, yes. One that just might cost you..." *Daresay I like where this is going...*

"Extortion now, is it? My patience is running extremely thin. Perhaps the time for words is past..."

Perhaps it's better if I don't push my luck. "Look, I'm only trying to get some answers..."

"I'll be the one demanding answers around here. You've obviously no idea what you've stumbled into, and your situation is only worsening. I'm not going to ask again: WHY ARE YOU HERE?"

I didn't much like being shouted at. *We were having such a polite conversation, too...* "Fine. I... used to have this ring, you see... small, silver in color, with two things engraved onto it. The first are the initials 'G.B.' and the second is the imprint of P. Schuyler & Sons." I pretended all the while that the ring wasn't sitting comfortably in my pocket. If he was being so stingy with information, I was going to keep my secrets as well.

He sighed, calming slightly. "Ah yes, I see... a signet ring. And these letters G.B... more than likely they belong to the individual who purchased the ring from us."

A young child could figure that much out. "I guessed as much. Could you tell me the identity of the owner?"

"Well, it seems we are at a crossroads, my friend. We, the Schuyler family, have been in business for more than 50 years. Never once in all that time have we betrayed the trust of a customer. And yet here you are, and so much you've seen!"

"Yes, indeed we are at a crossroads. Where to go?" I was all business.

"I see. Perhaps we have something you need and you have something of ours as well? We are hurting no one here... the spirits of these dwarves are long gone, and we own the land upon which this tomb lies."

I thought to Magnus and chose my words carefully so as not to needlessly anger him. "Don't you think that the dwarves might consider this heinous?"

"This tomb is from a clan long forgotten... the very fact that it lies here in the lowlands and not the mountains says that they were more than likely considered a lesser dwarven people. In fact, it's a strong possibility they were outcasts... you know a dwarf's true home is ALWAYS in the tight-carved caverns of mountain stone..."

That makes sense. I'd been thinking something along those lines anyway.

"Well, I'm convinced. Maybe we can come to an agreement?"

He thought about it carefully before slowly nodding. "Yes, I think that might just be possible. If you agree to tell no one about our business operations, I will find out for you who owns this ring. Are we agreed?"

"Agreed." I said firmly. *There can always be a peaceful resolution.*

"How dare you speak of treaties with these creatures? Will you ignore the crimes they have committed against my people? Does the friendship I've offered to you mean anything?"

At least I've been hoping for a peaceful resolution.... Magnus, You've got to be completely off your rocker! THESE AREN'T YOUR PEOPLE!

"Magnus, please... let's think about this..."

"Fine. If I must, I will fight them even alone. But I ask you one last time... please! Join me against these monsters and help me to avenge my people! We've fought together as brothers, as friends! I've bled with you! Don't turn on me now!"

Damnation! Don't make me do this, Magnus! He was being horribly overdramatic considering we'd known each other the better part of a day, but he had a point... if a weak one. I hated him for making me choose. *Breaking into warehouses ruffles your feathers, but needless murder is alright? You're a damned hypocrite.*

I wouldn't kill for money, but I had never considered the complicated circumstances under which needless death became acceptable. *Ugh.* Unfortunately, my choice was far more complicated than that. My choice wasn't to kill or not kill, it was of whom to kill. If I had to kill either the necromancers or the dwarf, as much as I didn't like the dwarf, the choice was obvious. "You're right! What was I thinking? Attack!" *You've not made our friendship any stronger this day, Magnus. I*

hope it was worth it.

The battle was over nearly before it even began. The three men we fought against weren't accustomed to fighting in hand to hand combat. They tried feebly to cast a few spells, but those bounced harmlessly off of the shields I'd constructed. I closed the distance between us quickly and my dagger saw each of them dead in mere moments.

I didn't even stop to check their corpses. I walked over to the filing cabinets on the right side of the room and popped the lock with my pick. I shuffled around inside until I found a particularly interesting document.

CLASS OF SERVICE	Tarant Union Telegraph	SYMBOLS
Class A Gold		ST-Soup
Class B Fair		ST-Steak
Class C Poor		NR-No Response

NO RESPONSIBILITY is assumed by this Company, beyond the exercise of due diligence and good faith in the transmission of messages, but their best

To P. Schuyler & Sons
STOP Please accept this telegram as my
commitment for payment of the signet ring I
had made for my son, Gilbert Bates.
STOP Payment has been wired as per your
instructions. I will arrive in Tarant in two
weeks to pick up the ring.
STOP Sincerely,

Benjamin Bates STOP

Gilbert bloody Bates. I'd thought of that briefly, but I didn't really suspect it could've possibly been him. "I found what I'm here for, let's get out of here." I didn't even wait for a response.

We didn't even get back to the top floor before Magnus was falling all

over me with his 'gratitude'.

"Thank you, my friend, for fighting by my side. I'd like to share something with you... my family name..."

He looks at me solemnly.

"The name of my family is Shale Fist, and I, Magnus Shale Fist, am grateful to you. The dwarves of this clan would also be grateful to you, were they not long dead..."

You KNEW?! You ADMIT IT?! "But isn't this YOUR clan, Magnus...?" I taunted him.

Magnus looks around, somewhat dejectedly.

"No... I don't think so."

He seems to struggle with the words.

"I... I so wanted to find a clue as to who or where I come from, but I don't think these dwarves are my lost clan."

"Uh... truly a pity. Let's get out of here..." *I don't want to hear your bloody excuses after the fact. It's your fault that anybody had to die. To hell with you.*

He grumbled a bit at my harsh tone. "Yes, I suppose I'll travel with you awhile..." *I'll be surprised if you last a day. I'm not holding back my thievery for your sake.*

The man at the front desk had finally gone home for the day by the time we emerged from the tomb beneath the store, so getting out wasn't difficult at all. Anybody who knew anything about Tarant knew where Gilbert Bates lived and I was in no mind to delay any longer than I already had in tracking down the owner of the ring. It was late, however, so I took the time to get a quick night's sleep. I doubted Gilbert got many midnight visitors anyway.

Bates' mansion was almost as far as it could be from the Bridesdale so travel there took quite a bit of a walk. Although it was impossible to tell whether it was likely to rain or not given the gray haze that floated above Tarant, a malevolent rumble from the sky suggested a storm was brewing. It was unfortunate that Tarant smelled as badly as it did because I normally enjoyed the scents that rain brought with it. Here in Tarant it would only make things smell worse. I confidently approached the guard standing in front of Bates' mansion. "Pardon me, good sir, but I have a matter of utmost importance to discuss with Mr. Bates."

He tapped his foot impatiently, crossing his arms. The chainmail that hung loosely from his body made a pinging noise as he shifted. "And this matter would be pertaining to?"

"I need to talk to him about a ring of his that I found." For once I was telling the truth in trying to gain entry.

He garbles

"Just get us out of here. Move on."

Not that the truth had any different results from my very poorly constructed lies. *If you weren't going to believe me then why did you bloody ask?* "How can I get in to see him, then?"

The guard seemed bored with this conversation, as though he'd had it hundreds of times in the last week. "That is not possible. Mr. Bates see no one, especially now, with the recent attempts on his life."

I thought I remembered hearing the paper criers yelling something or other about that recently, so I asked more about it. "Attempt on his life?"

He garbles

"Quick! Attack the intruders!"

Chukka didn't sound like a name I was even close to familiar with. It sounded more like a nickname if anything. "Chukka? What kind of person is named Chukka in this day and age?"

The guard seemed more interested in this line of conversation than the line of conversation that involved telling me 'no' repeatedly in new and interesting ways. "Chukka is Mr. Bates' ogre bodyguard. Mr. Bates saved his life somehow, years ago. Chukka has been at his side ever since."

Right. An ogre. I suppose it's only appropriate that Mr. Bates has an ogre... and his ogre is even more than just another decoration!

"Nevertheless, it is imperative that I get in to see Mr. Bates."

"Well... we've been having some problems with saboteurs at the factory. If I could "take care" of them, I am sure Mr. Bates would want to thank you personally."

"You have piqued my interest. What else can you tell me?" I was admittedly curious, but I didn't like the idea of having to kill anybody

just to see an arrogant old bastard with far more money than friends.

He sighed, "Not much, really. They usually strike in the middle of the night, some time after midnight. We've lost several guards we've sent there to stop them."

What kind of an idiot do you take me for? "If your guards can't stop them, what chance would I have?"

"Not much of one, I am afraid. You asked how to get in to see Bates, I told you. If you are not interested, please leave."

"Then I'll be doing just that. Goodbye." *There's always another way, my good man, there's always another way.* Mr. Bates had more than his fair share of enemies and I had a feeling that his closest rival might be interested in helping a thief infiltrate the Bates estate.

The Appleby factory wasn't even remotely difficult to find. It was nearby, loud, and belched out far more smoke than any other factory in all of Tarant (quite the impressive feat, to say the least). I tried knocking, but I could scarcely even hear the sound myself. I simply walked inside and up to the only gentleman I saw. "Excuse me, sir," I shouted loudly over the clattering of machinery, "Are you Mr. Cedric Appleby?"

"That is correct, madam. Cedric Appleby. Scholar, gentleman, businessman, and owner of the second largest steam engine company in all of Arcanum."

That's quite the boast, as there are only two, you pompous fool. "Second largest? Why aren't you the largest?"

His face turned red and he started ranting seemingly to nobody in particular. "It's that damned charlatan Bates, being hailed as a hero... Hah! I spit on him! His intelligence is but that of a gnat's compared to mine!"

At least we're getting to the right topic now. "What do you know about Gilbert Bates?"

"Gilbert Bates is a common thief, nothing more. I have known him since childhood, until he began consorting with the dwarves. They gave him the steam engine, I'm sure of it! And everyone thinks he invented it!"

"The scoundrel! But how has he invented so much since then?" My

sarcasm was completely lost on him, though that was probably a good thing. It was just easier to play along. I wouldn't get anywhere by calling the man a lunatic, even though the term was entirely accurate.

"He has stolen everything from me! I know for certain that he has hired mages to read my thoughts for all of his designs. I cannot count the instances I have been envisioning my newest invention and he produces it!"

I'm quite sure that the head of the world's largest technological company makes a habit of employing mages. They must cast their spells right alongside the happy hum of the steam engines! "Uhh... I can understand your frustration, but what can be done?"

Appleby was barely listening. "He needs to be humiliated! Exposed for the fraud that he is!"

"Well," I began to offer, "If you'll help me sneak into his mansion I can help you expose him."

Finally the cranky old man started to notice that I still existed. He glared at me suspiciously, "I'm not so sure I can trust you. Would you be interested in doing me a favor to prove you can be trusted?"

Everybody wants bloody favors. Why can't I just go into the mansion and expose him for you? Why do I have to prove anything? You ought to do ME a favor to prove I can trust YOU. I'm not the bloody lunatic. "Why certainly, Cedric."

"Bates is working on a new steam engine design which, of course, he stole from me. I need you to destroy the prototype."

It was at once both what I expected and a complete surprise. "How will this humiliate and expose him? Humor me."

"It is clear to someone of my advanced abilities that your intellect has difficulty following my reasoning. Consider this a preamble to the inevitable ruination of one Gilbert Bates, as well as a test of your trustworthiness."

Not at all. Got it. As much as I was beginning to hate old Cedric at least his offer didn't involve killing anybody. "I accept your proposal."

"Stupendous! Here is some dynamite to expedite your mission of destruction. His factory is in close proximity to his house; you can't miss it. At the tail end of Ten Hands Alley, to be precise about the

matter."

"It'll be done tonight, then. If you listen carefully, you might be able to hear the explosion." The man rubbed his hands together greedily, not hearing a damn thing I was saying. He was too lost in thoughts of his revenge.

Magnus confronted me after we left, "I have to admit, madam, I'm not liking this one bit. I say we go back to that guard we were talking to earlier and explain about all this. Perhaps then he'll let us in."

I shook my head, "I'm afraid that's simply unreasonable, Magnus. It would be impossible for them NOT to know about Appleby at this point. Just look at how he yammers on to anybody that'll listen, and he's the laughing stock of the town to boot! They know what's going on, they just don't take Mr. Appleby seriously. We'd be laughed away from the gate."

"That may be so, madam," he tried to convince me, "but it's a sight better than destroying a brand new piece of technology."

I knew something of dwarves and technology. "So you've developed a sudden love for human technological expansion, then, have you?"

He grumbled some more, "Perhaps you're right, madam. I will go along with this just this once. Consider it a thanks for your help with the Schuylers."

I was still angry with Magnus over that, but it wasn't the proper time or place to argue. We had arrived at the factory and I was beginning to watch the guard patrols, memorizing them to make slipping inside easier when night fell.

After only a few short hours the time to slip in was at hand. The guards didn't even have a clue that I crept past them under the cover of darkness. Locked doors gave way beneath my gentle pick, drawers and chests popped open revealing all sorts of useful junk and even the occasional schematic. Finally I found the prototype engine that Appleby was enraged over. I set the timer on the stick of dynamite and made my escape.

The explosion could probably be heard for miles around. There was no time to waste in getting the hell out of there before people came running to see what the fuss was about. I didn't want my name being associated with Appleby's quackery no matter how badly I needed his help. I returned to Appleby immediately. "The prototype has been destroyed."

"Hee hee hee. You'll have to excuse my chortling; this is a sweet moment for me. Gold pieces for you, satisfaction for me."

I didn't even care about the money for once. "Now that I've done your job, can you get me into Bates' house?" *I've been bloody patient enough.*

"Most decidedly, my friend. Hee hee hee. If I could only see the look on Gilbert's face. Oh, excuse me. Here are some servant's clothing. Tell the guards at the front that you are the new replacement."

I looked at the worn old dress disdainfully. *Cedric, there are THREE of us you damned fool.* I was just going to have to find my own way in after all. *Hmm... the Bates estate IS where the old castle used to be... perhaps that passage in the cemetery will come in handy after all.*

"When you are inside Bates' domicile, I would be ecstatically grateful were you to find some sort of incriminating evidence to help me humiliate and expose Bates for the fraud he is."

No, Cedric. I'll not play your dangerous games any longer. "Consider it 'found'" I lied.

Chapter the Twenty Fourth: The Misguided Birth of the Modern Age

The storm that had been brewing earlier was finally starting, and I wanted to get inside as quickly as possible. I wasn't looking forward to mucking around in a deadly secret passage and even less so while WET. I decided it would be best to at least try and reason with Bates' guard. Magnus could've been right after all. "Hello there, friend. I've got a bit of a tip for you."

"Well, there is something you should know, friend. We have people watching Appleby, and I happen to know you've been involved with him. I have simply been having fun with you... now I suggest you take your sorry hide away from here, post haste."

"I, uh, I don't know what you are talking about!" ...*and just why would I think that Magnus was right? I've gone totally crazy.*

The guard took on a very angry, stern tone, "I suggest you be on your way before I have you arrested. I have no patience for Appleby or his ilk."

That does it. Now I'm angry. "Are you mentally deficient? I'm trying to warn you!"

"Please take your insults elsewhere. I have a job to do here." I could tell from his tone that he desperately regretted having no actual proof of my involvement with Appleby. If he could've arrested me he would've, no doubt. Luckily for me I was very good at leaving little to no proof.

An angry rain poured out of the skies with malevolent fury as I ran towards the cemetery. By the time I reached the hidden passageway I was soaked to the bone, my boots covered in mud. Virgil brushed the

remaining water off of his plate, having avoided the worst of it sheerly by being so well covered.

The passage itself was comprised of several long and winding passageways each separated by trapped and locked doors. The locks I could bypass easily enough, but I had little experience with or patience for traps. I plodded onward stubbornly, getting zapped, stabbed, and even shot on occasion. If the door traps weren't bad enough the floors along the passageways were absolutely riddled with even more traps.

"Samantha!" Virgil scolded as he mended the worse of my wounds with magick, "Have you gone completely mad! Turn away from this foolishness and let's find another way in! There's got to be some other way... any other way. Please?"

"Absolutely not, Virgil. I've decided this is the best way in and so this is the way we'll go i--erggh." I stepped on another electrical trap and the jolt of current that flowed through my body made speech temporarily difficult. Virgil glared at me and I rubbed a salve over one of my bullet wounds. *Jayna, where have you run off to...?* It was thanks to her that I had any salves at all, and they were coming quite in handy for times like these.

Magnus followed along with Virgil and I, making damn sure to complain as loudly and belligerently as he could whenever he found himself on the receiving end of another trap. "I'll not continue to stick by your side if you insist on dragging me through places like this," he warned. I didn't even give him the dignity of a response. *I'm taking the lead and I've been stabbed at least twice as many times as you have, yet you still complain.*

After what seemed to be an interminable march down a path that spelled certain doom, I finally encountered a ladder leading upward. Climbing it took me up into a pleasantly warm and dry building. The fancy decorations and artwork that hung on the walls reassured me that my memory had been correct. I had just broken into the mansion of the esteemed Gilbert Bates.

Better steal what I can while the thieving's good! I opened up various

cabinets, closets, and drawers in the room I found myself in but didn't find any actual valuables. I did find sets of dry clothes for me and my companions, however, and they just so happened to be servant's uniforms. *Oh Cedric... you had the right idea, but you're too much of a damned fool to actually make anything useful out of it.*

The main entry hall was breathtakingly grand. Two staircases with gilded railings and ornate carpeting wound up to the second floor hallway. I followed them upward almost in a trance, merely letting my eyes soak up the grandiose wealth that must have gone into decorating and remodeling the old castle.

An older gentleman on the second floor glared at me suspiciously as I absent-mindedly entered his room. "I do not recognize you, are you new here?"

I nearly gasped. *...but I recognize you... how could I not?* "I'm not a servant. I need to speak with you about this ring." I pulled the signet ring out of my pocket and showed it to him in an open palm. "Great Gods! How did you come by that ring?"

I told you it was bloody important, you lousy gate guard. I ought to tell Bates to fire you. I almost died in that damned passage! "A gnome gave it to me as he lay dying."

Mr. Bates grew almost angry when I said it, shouting at me as if I'd offended him. "A gnome! What manner of tomfoolery is this? Are you certain it was not a dwarf?"

I nodded slowly, as if speaking with an imbecile. I knew that Gilbert Bates was no imbecile, however his present attitude confused me. "Of course. I've never seen a skinny, beardless dwarf."

He seemed to calm down but he was very pensive about what I'd just told him. "Yes. I am... familiar with dwarves and their customs. Tell me, was there anything distinctive about this fellow?"

You mean other than the melodramatic speech, lying in flaming wreckage, or the... oh, that. "He had a scar over his left eye."
"By Alberich! I knew in my heart that was no gnome. It was Stennar

Rock Cutter."

He is visibly shaken by this realization.

Alberich? Why is a human invoking the name of the god of dwarves? "I suppose it could have been a sick dwarf, but his beard..." I could tell Magnus was seething silently behind me, but I didn't know if it was at the mention of a beardless dwarf or a human invoking his god's name.

Mr. Bates pressed on. "Yes, I know. It is madness... but please, tell me, did he say anything to you before he died? Did he say anything about, uh... about me?"

You must find the boy... hmm, come to think of it Bates is hardly a child.
"He said he had escaped to warn us about 'the evil'..."

That seemed to confuse Mr. Bates just as much as it had me. "The evil? What evil? And where did he escape from?"

I shrugged hopelessly. "He didn't say. I was hoping you would know what it meant. He said that you would know what needed to be done." *At least I think he meant Bates... it is his ring, and he seems to be familiar with the gnom-er, dwarf.*

"Something horrible must have happened after... after I..."

His voice trails off.

"He's obviously too distressed to continue. Did he... did he say anything else?"

"He referred to you as a boy. Why would he do that?" Gilbert Bates was an old, old man. He was quite a bit older than even myself and I was certainly no spring chicken. I supposed that I wasn't exactly an old woman, either, but nobody would even think to refer to me as a little girl. Referring to Bates as a boy made even less sense.

"I do not know. Even though dwarves reckon time differently than humans, he must have realized that I am now an old man. Perhaps it is because I was but a boy when I... when I betrayed his trust all those years ago."

Betrayal? Now this is getting interesting. Bates' voice sounded so desponded and dejected, yet still I could not bring myself to feel true pity for him. It's difficult to pity a man surrounded by servants and

wealth when you've spent most of your life stealing or being abused just so you could survive. "How did you come to betray him?" Aside from that simple matter, he certainly wasn't the only one to have regrets in his past. *Oh what I wouldn't give to take it all back...*

He hung his head low as he spoke, "That, that is quite the long tale... a tale of my shame, it is."

My utter lack of sympathy actually made me feel guilty. Surely Bates' regrets were no less significant to him than my own were to me. There was just something about him, about how much better of a life he'd had that set off a terrible jealousy inside of me. I supposed that, in a way, my guilt was a poor form of sympathy. At the very least I felt bad, and that was something. "I'm listening."

"It's ironic that my greatest mistake is that which brought me such wealth. As a youth, I was enamored of all things dwarven, so I sought out the nearest clan and attempted to impress them with my grasp of their technology. They laughed."

Ironic indeed. When I made a mistake I got locked up and nearly starved to death. Instead, you strike it rich.

He continued his story, "I was obviously a novelty to them, a ridiculous human who had a natural bent towards technology. I suppose it didn't help that I was a mere 14 years old at the time. I became something they humored to entertain themselves. Stennar was the only one who truly called me friend in all those years, and betrayal is how I repaid his friendship. It was he who first showed me their steam engine, as if he knew I could appreciate the beautiful intricacies of its design."

So Appleby isn't a total loon after all. Perhaps that's not the best way to think of it. Appleby is still a total loon, he just happens to be right about that one tiny little thing.

"They had left it to rust in a corner, as they had very little use for a device that would reduce the need for sheer physical power. Imagine a dwarf relying on a device to do his digging for him! It's preposterous."

Magnus nodded affirmatively as Bates continued his story, "I asked him if I could tinker with it, perhaps improve on it, as I knew this

was the key to becoming truly a part of the dwarven world. I quickly devised a way to use it to power a pump for draining the mines. When I fell all over myself trying to explain it to them, laughter was, once again, their only response. I knew I had to somehow gain their respect, so I hastily sketched some schematics and set out to prove my theory.

"The struggling human mining company that I brought the plans to offered me a share in their mines for the steam pump! I was ecstatic - I had not a care for their mines or their money, I desired vindication! When I returned to the dwarves to boast of my accomplishments and be welcomed into their clan... they were gone. The inventions came quickly after that, fueled by my anger and confusion."

"How could they have denied me my place amongst them after all my labors? Somehow I felt I could still prove myself to them. I continued searching for them in all my spare moments, but to no avail. But then they came... the robed ones."

"They appeared to me late one night and they warned me never to speak of, nor try to find, the dwarves again. Still being a mere lad, you can imagine the terror that put into me. As my wealth and power grew, I shook off some of my youthful fear and hired the first in a long chain of investigators to locate Stennar and his clan."

"None of them ever returned with any worthwhile information, and some never returned at all. The ones that did told of vicious traps and creatures attacking them from the shadows. As word of these failures spread, it became more and more difficult to find souls brave enough to take on the challenge."

...and now here I come, uninvited, straight into your home... bringing the strongest link you've got left... and you can't help but treat me like your best friend, tell me everything you've wanted to say for so many years but couldn't... I swallowed hard, wishing that I hadn't somehow become involved in all of this. "But why did he send me here with your ring?"

"He knew that ring would lend veracity to your tale. I gave Stennar that ring the last time I saw him. And now he is dead..."

He pauses for a moment, perhaps to compose himself.

"If only we knew what he meant by 'the evil.'"

I felt silly saying it, but I had precious little else to go on. "The Panarii think the 'evil' refers to someone named Arronax."

Mr. Bates frowned and waved his hand dismissively, "I don't put much stock in religious ramblings. I'm more concerned with who killed Stennar, and why, and what all this has to do with my relationship with the Black Mountain Clan."

I shrugged, "So what is to be done, now?"

"There must be some clue left in the Black Mountain mines; I'm certain of this. You seem to be a resourceful individual. Would you be interested in searching the mines for some clue as to their whereabouts? I would make it worth your while, I can assure you."

So now you wish to hire me as your newest investigator? "I'd like to ask you some further questions before I commit myself." Absolutely not... I've no cause to risk my life even further just for financial gains and intellectual curiosities... damnation, I've already decided I'm going to accept, haven't I? One of these days I'm going to get my fool self killed.

He nodded patiently. "Of course. What would you like to know?"

I tried to wrap my head around everything he'd just told me. "So... you didn't actually invent the steam engine?"

He countered as though he'd been waiting for somebody to ask him that question for the last 60 years. "I have never actually claimed that I did! It was just people's assumption. I have invented any number of devices based off its principles, but I did not invent the first one."

"Is that not dishonest? Taking credit for something you didn't do?" I felt hypocritical asking that. I certainly wasn't going to win any awards for honesty.

"Yes, it is, and it torments me every day. I was but a child when the robed ones gave me their dire warnings, and I was terrified. They were explicit that I was not to reveal the origins of the steam engine." "I see. That makes sense. ...but why the need to impress the dwarves after they rejected you?" Perhaps that was where Bates and I differed. When I was rejected I sought to harm those that I felt wronged me, whereas Bates instead tried to gain their favor.

"You don't understand. I was... I was orphaned at a young age. The dwarves represented everything I wanted my family to be: a tight-knit clan. And the respect I had for their brilliance with technology...

I made the mistake common to youth: I thought intelligence equaled compassion. I needed to belong, to find that I had some worth."

I do understand, Mr. Bates. You are not the only one in this world that grew up without parents... and you are not the only one to make terrible mistakes because of it. "You were orphaned? What happened?"

The story he told didn't really seem to make him sad anymore, which made me feel slightly less guilty about having asked. "My mother died bringing me into this world. I believe my father died then as well, even though he continued to exist in the world for some eight more years. When he could stand living no longer, he took his own life.

"He left me decently provided for, and with his grasp on reality becoming more tenuous each day, I believe he felt I would be safer in the care of others. The last thing he did in this life was to give me that ring."

I thumbed the ring unconsciously. "And then you gave it to Stennar?" "That is how much his friendship meant to me. I was devastated when he disappeared with the rest of the clan. I believe I felt more deserted and alone then than I did when my father killed himself." I understood Mr. Bates' sentiment all too well. I thought then that we had more in common than he would ever truly realize. I quickly shifted the subject before getting too mired down in my own emotions and memories. "Uh, well... what about the attempt on your life? Nasty business, that."

"There's not much, really, as Chukka is given to overzealousness in his protection of my person. He rendered the interloper lifeless before I could question him. All he had on his person was an amulet bearing the symbol of the Molochean Hand: the eye in the hexagram." I nearly fainted from shock and worry. Sweat began dripping from my nervous brow. *They're after Bates, too... and they almost succeeded.* "The Molochean Hand?" I needed to know anything that Bates could tell me.

"They were a religious order of assassins some years ago. Rumors of their continued existence surface periodically but are usually proven to be hoaxes. I figure this for a new group trying to adopt some of the prestige of the name."

I do desperately hope you are right, Mr. Bates. I care not for ancient orders of assassins making attempts on my life. "They seem to be after me as well."

He was unphased. "Let us hope for both our sakes that they are mere pretenders to the name, then. I would be loathe to have the authentic Molocheans out for my blood."

You and I both, good sir. I have a feeling not many would take pleasure in such things, really. "Why do you suppose they tried to kill us?"

"I do not know. But I am beginning to believe they are behind Stennar's death. This all seems to be pointing to my involvement with the Black Mountain Clan, doesn't it? That is why I feel it is imperative to find out their fate. Our lives seem to be dependent on it, in fact." I glanced over at the ogre casting threatening glares from the corner of the room. "Some of our lives more than others, eh?" I hoped that Mr. Bates might see fit to provide this potential investigator with a bit of protection.

He looks at his enormous bodyguard.

"Yes, it would seem that I am well protected here, but the more staff one has, the easier it is for one of them to be bribed or replaced with an assassin. Also, my notoriety keeps me a prisoner inside my house. They will always know where to look for me. You, on the other hand, can blend with the crowd, so to speak."

I supposed that was true enough, I had never really considered what it would be like to be rich and famous. The rich part was always a desire of mine from the first time I had to steal to eat, but the famous part not so much. "Can you tell me anything of your business, Mr. Bates?"

"Well, as you know, I am the foremost manufacturer of steam engines in Arcanum, virtually without competition. I am working on a prototype for a smaller, more efficient engine right now, as a matter of fact. I also have various interests in other technological endeavors."

Err... about that prototype, you see... I wanted to mention Cedric in hopes of getting on Mr. Bates' good side. Not to mention I wasn't happy with how that business had went and it would bring me relief to remove the suspicion from my name. "How have you devastated

your competition so?"

Mr. Bates shrugged almost sadly. "It is not much of an accomplishment when old Cedric Appleby is your chief competitor. Poor Cedric. Always was a bit of a blundering fool. I really wish I could have convinced him to come work for me..."

That was something I had not expected to hear. "Why? I mean, if he's such an idiot?" *There's no 'if', he IS an idiot.*

"Cedric and I were close friends when we were children. He was furious that I wouldn't introduce him to the dwarves... can you imagine? I had a difficult enough time gaining their respect without his simple-mindedness. After I invented the steam engine, he began to despise me. Strangely enough, I wish he was still my friend some days."

Perhaps now was a bad time to bring it up, but I wanted to mention it before the subject changed again. "Appleby tried to hire me to steal something to expose you with." *Well... that cat's out of the bag.*

"Cedric, you bastard! I tire of his games... sadly enough, I think it's time for someone to pay him a visit before he finally gets up the nerve to start hiring people to kill me."

I began to sweat again at just what that implied. It was never my intent to get Mr. Bates to kill or otherwise harm Cedric, but he'd just spoken of doing so as casually as he might've asked a servant to fetch his shoes. I needed to change the subject, and fast. "Do you have any labor difficulties in your factories?" *Good god, I hope I never get on your bad side.*

He looks at me suspiciously.

"Why do you ask? You're not a labor sympathizer, are you? A unionizer, perhaps? I can assure you my workers are happy to have the jobs I give them. I treat all orcs—true blood and half-breed alike—better than any other factory owner. Of that I can assure you."

Out of the frying pan and into the fire. "I didn't mean to imply anything, sir. Simply curious."

"Yes, I can understand that, with all the talk of labor difficulties and protests in all the journals. But in answer to your original question, I believe that I am fortunate to have been spared a lot of the problems others have been experiencing with their workers. I do believe it is because I treat my workers better than most. Why, their working

conditions are almost human."

Almost human. You say it as though it should be something to be proud of. 'Why, I hardly abuse my workers!' Regardless of anything else I knew that I had no choice but to explore the mine. If the Molochean Hand that kept trying to kill me was truly the real one then I wouldn't be able to shake them off by running and hiding. It seemed that trying to run away only ever brought me pain anyhow, and I had finally resolved to confront my problems. "I've decided to explore the Black Mountain Clan mines for you."

"Splendid! Here, let me mark your map with the location of the Black Mountain mines. I am certain there must be some clues to be found there. Please, return as soon as you have found anything."

Our business was finally concluded. It appeared as though I was no longer an enemy of the Bates estate, but instead an employee. I wasn't entirely happy about it, but it sure beat running. "I shall return with the information you have requested."

"Oh, one more thing. I would like to purchase my ring back from you. I'd give you 1,000 gold. It would mean quite a bit to me; my father gave it to me before he died."

Greed overcame me. "That is not enough." *You're the richest man in Tarant, perhaps in the entire world, and you're giving me a pathetic offer like that after all I've gone through to bring this to you? Do you have any idea how dangerous that secret passage is alone?! ...and you! You're the reason those assassins are trying to kill me! 200 coins is an insult!*

"You will have to excuse an old man whose hearing is drifting away. I know that I could not have heard you refusing my generous offer."

The look in Mr. Bates' eyes was a frightening one, and I knew for certain that he had heard me correctly the first time. "What sort would I be to refuse such an offer?" I laughed nervously, tossing the ring to him. He motioned for a servant to pay me. I accepted the coins graciously, lest I offend Bates any further.

"Much obliged. I will speak with you when you return."

If I return, you mean. What makes you think I'll succeed where dozens of others have failed? I had to will my feet to move forward after the monumental task I'd just accepted. *Disappearing clans, ancient assassins... oh, Frederick, why did I ever leave you?*

Chapter the Twenty Fifth: The Uncivilized World

Virgil chuckled lightly as the gate to the Bates estate closed behind us, "So, off to the Black Mountain Clan mines, are we? Who'd have thought our travels would take us to a place like that?"

The very thought of it made me so nervous I felt faint. "I... uh... I think we've got some time, don't you? No sense rushing off right away when there's plenty of other stuff to be done... right?" I tried to give a reassuring chuckle of my own, but it came out rather forced.

Virgil looked at me very strangely, "Are you all right? Don't you want to find out why the Molochean Hand has been after us?"

"Why, of course I do!" I insisted perhaps too strongly, "...but... uh... not just yet... is there a problem?" *I've got to do it sooner or later...*

Virgil looked at me for several moments before his face finally softened, "No. There's no problem with that. Where would you like to go?" *Thanks, Virgil... I'm glad you understand.*



I pulled out my map and pointed at the Lair of Bellerogrim. "I've been interested in visiting there ever since I read about it at the Zoological Society. While we're out East we could also swing by the Elven Ruins and pick up that funerary stone for Mrs. Pin...per...pat... whatever her

name is. Can't tell one gnomish last name from the next anyway."

Magnus grunted, "Defiling graves now, are we?"

Thankfully, Virgil was willing to cover for me. "It's an archeological ruin, Magnus, not a cemetery. If you don't like it you're more than welcome to go back to the alley in front of P. Schuyler & Sons where we found you."

Once again, Magnus only gave a half-hearted grunt in response. *Not a particularly sociable fellow, is he?* Thinking about heading to the East, away from the Black Mountain Clan mines, already had me in better spirits. Just to be clear about things I summarized our plan, "So we'll take a trip to the Lair of Bellerogrim, then swing down to the Elven Ruins before stopping back in Tarant?"

Virgil nodded, "That sounds just wonderful to me, madam." With Virgil's blessing, that's just what we did.

The grasslands to the East rapidly turned from a vibrant green along the riverbank to a dull yellow. The farther away we traveled from the gray, smoke laden clouds above Tarant the clearer the skies became as well. I suspected the lands to the East didn't see much rain. The harsher the climate, however, the more attractive it becomes for lowlives, bandits, and other assorted rabble.

"Stop, human pig! If you want to live, you give us coin! 200!"

You simply don't have any idea who you're dealing with, orc. "And if I won't pay?"

"Give us coin! or die!!!!"

C. None of the above. "I do not have 200 coins, good sir." I wasn't about to hand over 200 of my hard earned coins just to save a few orcs with more muscles than sense from a good stabbing.

Needless to say, the orcs did not survive the experience. I felt no shame in protecting what was mine. I didn't have to resort to violence to get it and I had no pity for those who did.

At last we arrived at Bellerogrim's Lair just after dawn of yet another

sunny day. I was beginning to tire of the excessive sun and spending the day inside a dark cave sounded rather fantastic. Reading the plaque out front merely whet my appetite for knowledge, exploring the inside would hopefully satisfy it.

The cavern smelled of steel and dirt, having been an archeological dig site for quite a number of years. I imagined back when it was inhabited by a live dragon it would've smelled quite a bit more brutal. The massive skeleton in the center was quite the sight to behold and I spent hours just gazing at it, etching the memory of it into my mind. The bones were darkened, dirty, and cracked from the many years of exposure but it was remarkably solid considering its age. It made me shudder to think of what a fearsome creature a dragon would've been to encounter, and almost glad that this one was the last.

In exploring the rest of the cave I took particular note of a series of containers piled up in the far corner. I was most interested in pilfering their contents, but they were regrettably empty. Perhaps they'd been pilfered already by one or many like-minded individuals. It wasn't as though the cave had a rigorous guard on it. I was just surprised nobody had walked off with a giant femur yet. The thought was tempting, but I had too much respect for it as a museum exhibit to go quite that far. *So very tempting.*

As I pondered I slowly became aware of a narrow passageway on the far side of the boxes. Not being one to allow a mysterious passageway in an ancient dragon's lair go unexplored I set about clearing a path. They were far too heavy for me to move so I called upon Virgil and Magnus to help out. They broke open the boxes with their blades, making it easy to shove the remaining bits out of the way. Their blades got a little dinged up in the process, but it was nothing I couldn't fix.

Once the way forward was open I was off, nearly running down the passageway in excitement. I slowed quite a bit when I encountered the first little dragon spawn. It was no dragon, those had been extinct for years, but a dragon's brood was still nothing to trifle with. Curiosity, as always, got the better of me. I tried to slip by it peacefully. *If it bites, I stab.*

As continued past the little dragon thing it did actually bite me, and quite hard at that. I was surprised at the strength its tiny jaws could muster. *Damnation! I'm going to have to pick up some cleanser when I head back to Tarant.* Before it could bite me again I slipped around towards the creature's backside and slid my dagger between its scales expertly. It growled and gurgled, then fell face first onto the cavern floor. I actually felt somewhat guilty.

Virgil wrapped a bandage around my forearm where the creature had bit me, scolding me for my brashness as he did so. I didn't pay him much attention, however, since my attention was focused on the half dozen more dragon men that heard their brother's cry and were coming at me for revenge. I didn't make the mistake of underestimating the little things this time.

I rushed them straight away, not giving them the chance to surround me. My dagger dropped another one clear to the ground every time it struck. One, two, three, four, I counted them as they fell. Virgil and Magnus drew their charged blades in my defense, overtaking me and attacking the creatures yet further into the cave. The sickening smell of burnt dragon's flesh arose in their wake, tiny little corpses filling the cavern lightly with smoke as they smoldered and cracked.

My guilt only worsened as we cleared away this tiny little piece of history, but on the other hand it wasn't like anybody was really looking at it with all those boxes in the way anyway. Besides, the average museum visitor probably wasn't quite as good at stabbing as I was. They also probably gave 200 gold pieces to every thug they encountered when traveling. I was just keeping the area safe.

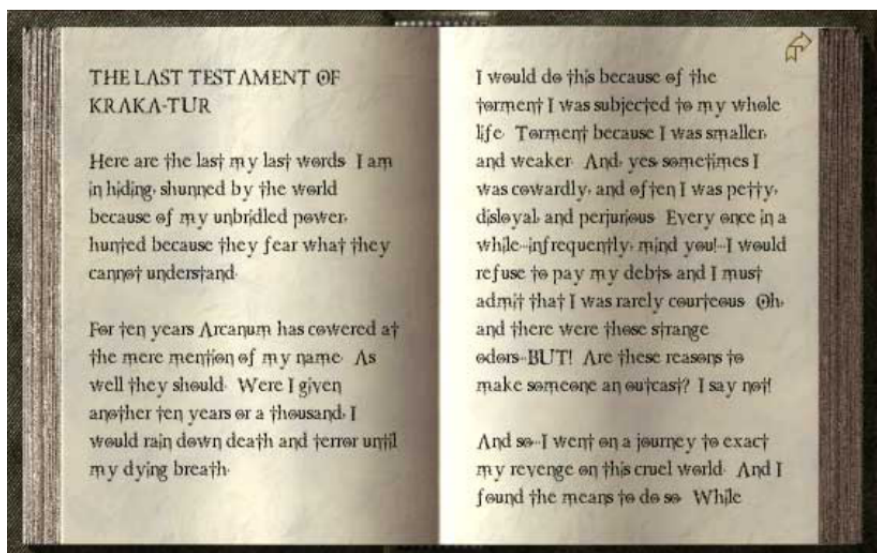
As I turned the next corner I nearly bumped into another dragon creature, this one significantly larger than the last several. It stood at least twice my height and its wings stretched the entire width of the corridor. It hissed at me, a vile and horrifying sound that I would not soon forget. Fire erupted in its hands, spilling out of them and onto the floor. As they fell the flames began to take the shape of a man, eventually rising up to the height of the dragon creature itself. *It may not breathe fire, but summoning a fire elemental is almost worse.*

Kill the mage and the summoned creature disappears. I had no choice but to eliminate the dragon creature as quickly as possible. It was far tougher than its smaller brothers, however. I struck at it again and again from behind, each time my dagger striking true, yet still it stood when I was done. Blood poured from its wounds and stained the ground beneath it, but it turned and it was angry. Its claws raked against my stomach, tearing straight through my armor and inflicting nasty wounds. It grabbed ahold of me and bit my shoulder, teeth piercing leather, skin, and muscle... stopping just short of bone.

Virgil charged the damned thing while I had it distracted and lay bleeding on the ground. His sword pierced the holes that my dagger had made, sending electricity throughout the creature's body. It shuddered violently as Magnus joined the fray, slicing away at its outstretched limbs. It cried in pain for several moments before finally crumpling to the ground, twitching and smoldering like its smaller cousins. I pulled a salve out of my purse and began slowly applying it to my shoulder and then stomach. *I seriously doubt any archeologists made it past that. I wonder what undiscovered mysteries could lay deeper in here?* It was so very like me to lay on the ground, broken and nearly dead, wondering what might lay around the next corner.

The three of us fought many more dragon creatures as we pressed on through the winding caverns. I lead us down several dead-ends, requiring a not insignificant amount of backtracking to find whichever passage I had overlooked. There were stacks upon stacks of gold littering the floor in some areas, each of them like miniature dragon's hoards. I was only too happy to take them. I even discovered a few unopened chests, plundering loot of an unknown magical nature inside. *I'll have to see what the gypsy woman says about this.*

Finally, after all other options were exhausted, I found a small, unremarkable chest at another dead-end. Inside of it was an old, worn book that lacked any significant decoration. *All the way back here and all I found was this book?* I hastily read through it, excited at what it might contain.



travelling in northern mountains I found an old magickal scroll. This scroll described a spell of such obvious power that it would not surprise me if it had been hidden away purposely. Arcanum was not ready for such magick. She would be forced to adjust.

The spell changed a man into dragon form, giving him all the gifts and powers of that evil beast. But the scroll also required the blood of a

dragon. There was only one dragon left in all of Arcanum... the great Dragon Bellerogrim... and I was fairly sure he wouldn't be very happy about making me a gift of some of his blood.

So I stole away to the secret temple of the Derian Ka and had them make for me the most terrible poison. Yes, the price was high... the damnation of seven generations of my family... but it was worth it! I had something with which to kill Bellerogrim. Now I had only make him eat it.

In the end it was a fairly simple task. I killed a crippled old farmer and stole his prize bull, which I fed well for a month and then coated with the poison. I led the poor creature to the lair of Bellerogrim, set it loose just outside the cave mouth and waited. Dragons when they are hungry think of little else. Believe me, I know the truth of these things now. The bull was eaten. Bellerogrim returned to his lair for a morning nap and died quite suddenly.

I drew his blood and became Kraka-tur... the most feared and terrible creature in all of the land. And now I am tormented again. Nasrudin and the Elven Council have found me, cornered me here in the lair of Bellerogrim. It smells terrible as the dragon is still returning to dust even after ten years. Why must they attack me? I am outnumbered! This is such an unfair set of circumstances! I have done nothing!

Perhaps I can slip out during the night...

I didn't know quite what to think after reading that. Although surely anybody I tried giving this to would proclaim it a hoax borne of my own addled mind I knew it to be true simply for where I had found it. The living dragon creatures and unstolen piles of gold were a testament to its veracity. *So the ancient, hideously evil Kraka-tur was just a petty and wicked man out for revenge?* The thing that struck me most about the whole thing was finding out just how Bellerogrim died. I looked at Virgil, "The gents at the Zoological Society will never believe this one."

He smiled quite genuinely, "You know, Samantha, I think you're right about that. Perhaps we'd best keep this to ourselves. Wouldn't want to spoil the mystery."

I smiled back, "Yes, you're right. I think I liked it better when I didn't know." Of course, being who I was, I always liked to know better than not... but still, it was quite sad what happened to the great Bellerogrim. This was one great mystery I felt better left unrevealed.

As I left the cave I began to feel very suddenly homesick. Although home was never too far from my mind it was the book more than anything that had gotten me thinking about it. I wanted to show it to Frederick, to explain to him where and how I found it. We would laugh over it, satisfied at the knowledge we learned from it. He would get up and place it on the shelf in his study. It wouldn't sit in some glass case, unread for years upon years. It would just be there on the shelf like so many other books, one little addition to his private collection.

I sighed longingly. If I were ever able to truly live out that moment I would first need to sort out all this reincarnation business and stop being chased by assassins. By the time that happened I would probably have amassed countless other books just like this one, and what a wonderful homecoming that would be. *If Frederick will even take me back after what I did to him.*



Magnus and Virgil eyed me almost suspiciously as we left the cave, heading towards the Elven Ruins. The sun shone down upon the plains as brightly as ever, but I didn't let it bother me any. I was excited at what we would find next, almost beginning to appreciate the adventure my life had become in recent months. I was very nearly skipping, and probably would have skipped outright if it wouldn't have worn me out.

I could see small tents about a mile out from where I had the Elven Ruins marked on my map, given the flat and near lifeless nature of

the plains. The tents probably belonged to the archeological team that had discovered the ruins, no doubt they were still busy exploring and excavating it. As I drew closer I saw several men all huddled about the entrance to the ruins themselves. It wasn't until it was too late that I noticed the dead body lying on the ground between them. "Hold there! What are you doing here!"

I saw it coming and still just walked right in... if I don't shape up I'll be dead by next week. "Uh... nothing. I was just traveling the countryside... beautiful plains out here, you know?" If I had a pet dog even it wouldn't have been convinced.

The man who spoke to me squinted his eyes and tilted his ears back slightly; as he did so I noticed he and his three friends weren't men at all: they were of elven heritage. "I don't believe you. I will ask you once more, what are you doing here?" *Damned haughty elves. They think they're so perfect.*

I considered telling the truth, but then thought of how often that ended up getting me into trouble. Still, lies weren't getting me anywhere either and it was worth a shot. "I was sent here to retrieve something."

His hand shifted to the blade at his side, ready to draw it if he didn't like what I said next. "What do you mean, 'retrieve something'?"

Although I was certainly nervous, another part of me also felt rebellious. I was having trouble deciding between leaving peacefully or telling him where to stuff it. I didn't like threats, and I liked violent thugs even less, regardless of whether they were elves or orcs. In the end I decided I'd avoid a conflict if I could, but I wouldn't feel bad if things came down to stabbing. *Stay back, Virgil.* "Some rich society woman paid me to get a funerary stone." *Yes, I'm just the messenger. This is that rich harlot's fault.*

He growled menacingly, but his grip on his blade loosened. "So you just thought you'd come here and desecrate our holy ground?"

I didn't see the sign that said, 'Elven Holy Ground, Do Not Desecrate' "I had no idea. I just needed the money. I am truly sorry."

"Tell us who she is, and we will let you go."

You don't have to ask me twice. I didn't like her anyway. "Mrs. Pettibone. She lives at 21 Lungsten Road in Tarant." It was funny how a nearby blade did wonders to jog one's memory.

"You're free to go, and you'd best be gone within the next two minutes." I still didn't like threats. When he wasn't looking I quickly jumped down into the tomb, hoping he wouldn't notice. Lucky for me, it seemed that he didn't.

Zombies. Of course. What else could be in a tomb except zombies? I miss the good old days when the dead stayed dead. After my trip through the Schuylers' basement I didn't have any trouble clearing out the rotting elven corpses that tried to force me out of their tomb. As long as the tomb wasn't guarded by dragonspawn I would be fine.

I did spot the funerary stone that Mrs. Pettibone had been asking for and I picked it up just on the chance that she lived long enough to pay me. It was a horrible thought, but really I had no respect for the men that threatened me upon entry or the woman who so desperately deserved the last name her gnomish benefactor thrust upon her. Perhaps if those elves had asked nicely I would've gone away empty handed. They brought this on themselves. As for the woman, well, she was the one that asked me to show up in the first place. If harm came to her over that, so be it.

When I left the tomb the elves that had threatened me were gone. *So much for Mrs. Pettibone, I guess. I'm not going to miss her.* I knelt down next to the mangled body of the dead professor. He'd just been doing research, not trying to upset anybody... just curious to study history. Then those damned elves showed up and they didn't only kill him for his troubles, but it was obvious they killed him slowly and painfully. I placed my hand upon his forehead and shut his eyes. *Rest now, professor.*

I looked up at Virgil and Magnus, "Let's get back to Tarant. If we can catch up with those elves I don't think I'll feel so bad about stabbing them after all."

"Now that's more like it!" Magnus grinned, "I didn't think you had it in you!" *Of course. He perks up at the first mention of violence.*

We weren't more than a day's journey out from Tarant if we rushed things, the dull gray smoke just barely visible on the horizon. We didn't run, that would've been foolish, but our pace was a decidedly rapid one. I was nearly tired out by the time we entered Tarant, but I had enough energy left to check on Mrs. Pettibone and hopefully catch the nasty elves that killed that poor professor.

Sadly, I was too late. The door to the Pettibone residence was left wide open, and there wasn't a soul inside. There was no sign of a struggle, nor hints of blood anywhere... she was just gone. It was actually quite a frightening sight given that I had some idea of what had transpired there. I cursed the lost opportunity to punish the elves for their crimes more than I did the loss of just another pompous upper class gnome's wife. I slid open the lock on her chest and placed the funerary stone inside. I had no further need of it and this was as good a place to leave it as any.

Lost in thought, I began to wander around the streets of Tarant. I'd taken so long getting there that morning was beginning to dawn and it was actually quite pretty this early, what with the sun low on the horizon and the streets hardly as crowded as they would be in only another hour. I was upset about letting the elves go when I had a perfectly good opportunity to stab them, and that further descended into guilt at not having avenged the poor professor.

"Take a gander at this. A flimsy human melee weapon."

Hello to you, too. "You are in splendid form today Sammie."

"Well, our little conversation has been a set of circumstances that I must endure here in Tarant. What was it you wanted with me? I seem to have forgotten."

When I thought about it I supposed it wasn't all bad that I ran into Sammie. On the one hand I worried for my belongings, but on the other hand he was the only person I could really go to for training.

"Say, Sammie, what is it you do here again?"

"You, madam, have the privilege of conversing with the greatest living pickpocket in all of Arcanum! I am the best. I will be caught if

I try to be modest about it, but it is hard when you are as good as I am."

I was admittedly curious, which wasn't a terribly uncommon feeling for me to have. "How did you become the Master?"

He looked at me as levelly as he could for being half my size. "My past is not open for discussion. Let's just say that practice makes perfect, and now that I am master of my profession, I can get anything I want. It is mine for the taking. Only now I find that the world is a very dreary and unchallenging place."

Well that was about as unsatisfying of an answer as you could possibly have given. "Very well. Sammie, I would like you to train me."

He is obviously disinterested in me.

"Talking is so boring. I would rather not trouble with incompetents, no offense. What skill do you possess already in picking pockets?"

"I'm quite the expert, actually. Why, I've picked various keys out of the pockets of shopkeepers all over this city. Nobody's wares are safe from me at night."

He grumbled. "I see... Well, you certainly have the talent for it, I must admit. Though you will never be as good as I am..." He turned aside and pretended to stifle a fake yawn. "But training is such a bore! It is so dreadfully dull, it fatigues me just thinking about it!"

I sighed, prepared to spend a little coin in order to make some. "How much is this going to cost me?"

"No, no, no, nothing like that! I don't want anything. You see, I can get anything I want. I am the master pickpocket! Hmm, there IS something that you can do... something that needs to be done... and something that will teach all of these snotty Tarantians a lesson. Ha! It is perfect!"

"Why do I think I am not going to like this?" *Great. Now I'm Sammie's personal toy for amusement.*

He laughs hysterically.

"You are going to strip naked and then run your ugly buttocks all around the city for everyone to see! These arrogant Tarantians will fall over in shock from their civilized city being invaded by perverts! It is perfect!"

I supposed that I didn't have nearly as many issues with simply taking

my clothes off as I did with what usually came after. Streaking around Tarant seemed like it could actually almost amuse me. It wasn't as if I cared overly much what the local populace thought of me anyway. *The upper class hasn't liked me since I was born anyway, how is this going to change a damned thing?* "Though I am certain I will regret it, I agree to do this thing."

He laughed and laughed as I agreed to it. If that's what it took to earn my training, then so be it. "Okay!" he started, "Strip naked, then run up and down Kensington Broadway. When you're done run around this plaza a few times for good measure. Then, I'll train you."

Virgil adjusted his helmet to make sure it was securely covering his face. Magnus merely looked at me half in shock and half in horror, "You've got to be kidding me, madam. Surely you're not actually considering..."

His speech cut off just as I finished removing my dress. I folded it up neatly and stuffed it into my purse along with my gloves and shoes. Without waiting for the reasonable part of my mind to catch up with the impulsive, I took off.

"Degenrate!"

First I traveled up Kensington all the way to the entrance of the Bates estate. The townsfolk gasped as I ran past and one particularly absurd woman even pretended to faint at my indecency. It wasn't long before angered shouts followed me as I ran.

He garbles

"Exposing himself!"

I turned around and ran back down Kensington towards the general store at the city entrance. As the angered shouts continued Magnus began to vocally agree with the people shouting at me so as not to tarnish his precious dwarven reputation. *I'll remember this, too, dwarf. You just wait.*

"Hey Missy come on over to my place"

"Get away from me! You WHORE!"

The farther I traveled the stronger the insults seemed to get. I could swear that a few of the insults were even coming from Virgil himself, but it was hard to tell behind that helmet of his. At least it sounded like Virgil's voice. If it were him, though, I didn't suspect he actually

meant it. We'd probably have a good laugh about all this nonsense later on.

"Spot the loony!"

Magnus repeated his protest as if saying it over and over again would somehow make it true. I passed back through Kensington Park to a particularly lukewarm reception. Tarantians were most certainly not happy to see me.

"Spot the loony!"

Even the guards were getting in on the 'fun' of shouting hostilities at me by the time I reached the bridge leading to the boil. I turned around and continued my nude parade back up the street towards the park once again. Much like the last time I turned around the insults only grew stronger on my second pass. Once the shock wore off people were more than happy to exclaim whatever came to mind.

"Young woman! Does your mum know you are out and about to undress like that?"

"Ho there! Marching about with your nethers to the air is certain wenchery!" one man shouted. I was almost beginning to feel embarrassed. It was like the kind of bad dreams normal children always complain about. Having now experienced it I could say quite certainly that my nightmares were worse. I hadn't cared what people thought of me before and I saw little reason to start caring just then.

"My blood! Do you realize that you are a naked young woman?"

No, I hadn't realized! Oh dear me, somebody fetch me some clothing! My expository sojourn throughout Tarant was coming to its conclusion and for that I was glad. I did precisely two laps around Kensington Park as Sammie had asked of me before hastily pulling my dress out of my purse and slipping it on once again.

Sammie was laughing and laughing as I approached him. "Well then, have you had enough?" He could barely speak as he continued his laughing.

"Of course," I responded, "I am more than ready to stop this foolishness." More than degrading, it was unpleasantly cold. Laughing.

"Congratulations, you are now a Master Pickpocket. Training will not be necessary now... You may go."

Oh you had best be kidding if you want to keep pointy objects out of your kidneys. "What? Are you attempting to back out of our arrangement?" "Don't you see? Now that you have been laughed at and ridiculed by everyone in Tarant, you will find that it is a lot more enjoyable to steal from them... fat, smug, and arrogant as they are. They are calling you the Pervert of Tarant! A reputation you will not be able to easily live down. Don't worry though, with your new skill you will be able to even the score quite nicely."

"You have a twisted sense of Logic, sir. Good bye." It was probably the cold that was making me cranky, but upon later consideration I realized that Sammie was right. I truly had always found it more enjoyable to steal from those that I thought deserved it, and who deserved it more than a bunch of rich, smug, high society bastards calling me a pervert behind my back without knowing the first thing about me? If enjoyment was all it took to be a master pickpocket, then I'd been a master pickpocket for months. Now if only I'd realized that before exposing myself to anybody and everybody going about their morning stroll in the largest city throughout all of Arcanum.

Chapter the Twenty Sixth: Dishonest Work Can Be Most Profitable

Sammie had gotten me in quite the mood for thievery, which I'm sure was his intent. There was at least one person down in Black Root that I'd promised to steal from, but I'd put it off in favor of sparing poor Jayna. I was sure Magnus wouldn't be thrilled, but I didn't particularly care either. It was a shame, really, just how little I thought of him since his little stunt in the Schuyler's Basement. His penchant for violence and distaste of thievery made for a peculiar and foul mix.

Vermilion Station was my next stop. I approached the ticket teller with a polite smile. "Hi, I'd like to reserve three seats on the train to Black Root if that wouldn't be any trouble."

She turned up her nose at the sight of me, "Hmph. I've heard about you, Samantha Colburn. If I were able to refuse ticket sales to a pervert such as yourself I most certainly would do so."

You've got to be kidding me. Heard about that already, have you? "Just give me the tickets." I slammed my 225 gold pieces on the counter angrily.

The woman quite haughtily asked me the litany of questions that accompanies travel by rail and, once those were finished, she handed me my tickets. I stuffed them in my purse with a smile, then crept around to the door leading into the ticket booths. I slipped inside quickly and took great joy in retrieving my recently spent funds from the ticket seller. *That'll show you for insulting me... Sammie would be proud.*

The train ride was a good deal more pleasant than trekking all about the countryside on foot. I certainly had a new appreciation for it after my recent journeys all over the eastern grasslands. As my mind wandered I suddenly remembered something about the morning's events that had been bothering me. "Virgil," I looked at him quite purposefully, "so am I to understand you think me some kind of degenerate?"

He cracked a rather wide smile and his face flushed a bit red, "I was wondering if you'd noticed. I... I didn't mean it, really..."

I smiled back at him, beginning to laugh, "No, I didn't believe that you did... just curious if it really was you. You're horrible." He and I both laughed some more over the whole thing while Magnus fumed in the corner. I wasn't sure if he was upset about the streaking or the pick pocketing that followed, but his being upset was hardly anything new so I didn't let it bother me.

Night had already fallen by the time the train arrived in Black Root. Since darkness provided the perfect opportunity for a bit of thievery I headed in the direction of the hedge wizard's shack, intent on pilfering his chest for D'ak Taan. The gnomish wizard himself was a paranoid sort, alertly guarding his front door with suspicion. He was also a bit of an idiot, leaving his window wide open. I slipped inside through a window and, after a bit of difficulty, sprung the rather complex lock on his chest.

One statue for D'ak Taan coming right up. Magnus hissed at me as I exited the shop, finally unable to hold his tongue any longer, "What the bloody hell was that for? Did I just see you taking something out of that wizard's chest? I'm sure that chest was locked when you went in there, too... and you know you're up to know good, sneaking in the window like that. Don't even try to pretend it's for some good cause this time."

I sighed, rolling my eyes before turning and staring at him, "Yes, Magnus, it was locked and I did take something from it. I know that you refuse to believe any good can come of thievery, but I assure you that I am doing this for a good cause." *That cause is my coin purse, but*

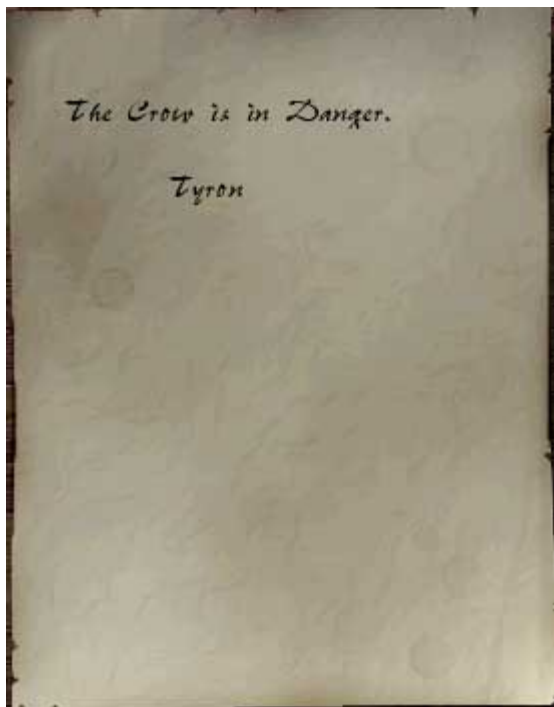
I'm sure some good will come of Black Root being allied with Cumbria instead of Tarant anyhow. "Given that I have agreed to do this thing and doing so requires me to either pilfer this statue or become violent with the man who asked me to pilfer it, I prefer this method."

"Well, if you ask me," he huffed, "violence against a thief hardly counts as violence at all."

I looked him straight in the eye and quite rudely said, "Well I didn't ask you, Magnus. I know your opinions and I quite thoroughly disagree with them. If I can avoid getting violent then I'll happily steal to do so."

He grumbled almost under his breath, "Well don't be surprised if I'm not around when you wake up in the morning." I was feeling particularly rebellious and decided to test just how much Magnus meant what he said. *Fine, if that's how you feel, we'll see how you like this...*

I crept into the shack next door to the hedge wizard's shack, intent on pilfering whatever minor valuables could've possibly been present. Unfortunately the drawers and chests were entirely barren and all I found was a note on the floor. It seemed like a rather pathetic attempt at thievery, but then again stealing just for the sake of aggravating Magnus was probably a petty thing to do. I did read the note, however.



Well, that explains that... actually, it doesn't explain a damned thing. As far as I could tell, the man that Cesare sent me to see had been living in the shack I was trying to pilfer, but had since left. I didn't particularly feel comfortable carrying the Siamese twin skulls around any longer, but neither did I like the idea of simply giving up my search. Since it was much more difficult to ignore my curiosity than my sense of decency, I left the skulls sitting in my purse for the time being.

The hour was decidedly late and I thought it wise to at least try and get some rest before I got even crankier than Magnus. I was already dangerously close. It would be a good idea to approach the thieves' camp when it was light out anyhow. There was no particular reason to trust D'ak Taan. I travelled just a few doors down to the brightly lit inn, where the only employee remaining awake was an elderly gentleman with a nametag that read 'Hallaway'. "Good evening, Mr. Hallaway. Might you have anything left to offer a traveler?" "Oh, certainly madam. We offer only the highest quality rooms with excellent amenities. Each room is decorated in the latest fashion,

complete with trunks for storing valuables. Additionally, we have guards to ensure the safety of our guests, all for a mere coin per night."

The desperation behind his sales pitch was quite clear. He wouldn't have offered a sales pitch like that if his business were thriving, certainly. Black Root wasn't exactly a haven for adventurers or businessmen. If anything it catered mostly to importers, smugglers, pirates, and seamen that felt more at home in their bunk on their ship than they did in an inn room. "Sounds very nice, but more than I can afford." I knew the chance to get a good deal when I saw one.

He looked at me rather sheepishly, trying to think of any way to rekindle my interest, "Well, business is rather slow at the moment. Would you be interested in completing a task in exchange for a room?"

Nice to know my instincts haven't dulled over the years. "I suppose that would depend upon the task..."

"A while back, I took my strongbox to the local blacksmith, Garret, for repair. He said he would fix it for 5 coins, to which I agreed. When I returned to get it, he demanded 20 coins. I refused to pay; I won't be swindled by that mongrel! However, it's an old family heirloom and I want it back."

I didn't really suspect Mr. Hallaway knew completely what he'd just asked, or how I'd interpreted it, but the way I saw it he would have to live up to his end of the bargain regardless. 'Recovery' was a specialty of mine. "You require my assistance with its return?"

"Yes... I'd be very grateful for your help. If you can get the strongbox back for me, I would reward you by providing you a room. In fact, if you get it back for me, you can have a room for as long as you require."

It seemed too good to be true. "That is very agreeable. Consider it done!" *I can almost hear Magnus cursing already.*

I crossed the street to the nearby blacksmith's shop which, given the time of night, was locked up tightly. The lock was actually of a rather decent quality and I made a note to return to the blacksmith for potential training, but it still succumbed to my skill with a pick. Magnus stamped his foot and waited outside.

Finding the strongbox wasn't particularly difficult for me. It was in a chest clearly labeled "Finished Work." The chest was also locked, and the lock was an even higher quality than the one on the door. The blacksmith certainly did know what he was doing. Nothing will stop a truly determined thief, however.

After enough prodding and experimenting I finally managed to turn the lock and open up the chest. Mr. Hallaway's antique strongbox was the only thing inside and I stuffed it in my purse quickly before getting the hell out of there. I didn't suspect Magnus was going to be terribly patient in his waiting. I strolled out of the shop and started walking in the opposite direction of the inn so as not to draw suspicion. Magnus followed angrily.

"I've had it!" He began yelling at me in hushed tones. I was just thankful he had the decency to be quiet about it instead of yelling about my thievery to the whole damned town. "If you will not desist with your underhanded behavior I will be forced to part ways with you. I have tried to be patient and tolerant with your ambiguous morals, but I cannot abide your behavior any longer!"

I really wasn't sure if he simply just liked to hear himself whining. "If that's what you must do, Magnus, then so be it. I don't need anybody with your attitude following me around. To be perfectly frank, I've been upset with you ever since the Schuyler's basement. You're the only reason anybody had to even get hurt, and three people died over it. I helped you kill them and that's on my conscience. Now I've never asked you to steal a damned thing for me, but still you can't keep your mouth shut when I go about stealing for my own reasons. I do think that makes you something of a hypocrite."

He sounded rather hurt by that comment. "I... I see. If that's how you feel, then so be it. I'll try to keep my mouth shut. You did help me out when I asked for it, and I wouldn't feel right about just abandoning you so soon after."

Here I thought you'd finally leave... whatever, if you can keep quiet about my thievery I'll not complain for the extra sword arm. Although I was bitter and angry towards him, I actually was glad Magnus was staying. For all the arguments I had with him, he still backed me up

when things got rough. I'd probably have been a broken wreck lying in the abandoned depths of an old dragon's lair if it weren't for him. I wished it were somehow easier to get along with him, but even thinking about it made me desperately crave a drink. I took a stop in a nearby pub as we passed by.

"Where is H.T. Parnell's Emporium of Wonders?"

Was. Where 'was' H.T. Parnell's Emporium of Lies. It seemed like pub philanthropy occurred at all hours of the night and I was certainly not one to argue about an extra 500 coins. Travel got expensive and I had to replenish my funds whenever the chance presented itself. I started to make a little game out of it. I decided I would allow myself one shot of whiskey for every question I answered. It was not only profitable but fun!

"Who would be least welcome in Tulla?"

Luckily for the drunks in the pub at that hour, I wasn't looking to get completely smashed. I was pleasantly wobbly only two shots in and the pain of Magnus' attitude was growing more and more dim. I slowly and carefully walked back to the inn on shaky legs, handing Mr. Hallaway his strongbox.

"Oh, well done! Here."

He takes it from me.

"I'm sure it was difficult to negotiate with one. Tell me... how did you manage to retrieve it from such a barbarian?"

Do you really think the blacksmith is even up at this hour? "I suspect the fool has not realized it is missing... yet." I probably wouldn't have been so forward if it hadn't been for the whiskey, but at that point I just didn't care. Mr. Hallaway wanted the strongbox, and I got him the strongbox. He never specified I had to negotiate.

Obviously he didn't quite feel the same way. He shouted at me, "You stole it?!"

My head was already starting to ache just a little bit. "That sounds so wrong. I merely returned it to its owner." It was a twisted truth, but a truth.

"I did not realize you were a woman of such methods! I do not know how to handle this. You have not solved my issue! You have compounded it! Don't you see that he will come straight to me when he notices it missing?!"

Is that the kind of thinking that makes people avoid stealing? Perhaps it's

a good thing people are so stupid. "He has no idea where it went. Why would he look to you?" If it hadn't been for the whiskey I probably would've just given up, paid for the room, and pick pocketed the money back. I didn't want to risk it, however, and I'd be damned if I was going to pay good money for a room after all the effort I put in. I got his damned box back.

Thinks for a moment.

"...I suppose you are correct. He would not associate me with its disappearance, would he?"

Suddenly looking amused.

"Furthermore, when I ask for it... he will have to admit it is missing. And then I will make him pay me its full value! Oh, this is quite a good turn of events!"

"Yes. I knew you would be pleased. Now about our agreement?" It was funny how quickly an 'honest' man would turn a blind eye to crime when given the opportunity. Even I wasn't that bad, at least I only ripped the blacksmith off once. *I may be a criminal, but even I have some morals.*

"As agreed, I shall give you a room to use at your leisure. You'll find an excellent suite just down the hall. I do hope you enjoy your stay, and thank you again."

"Pleasure doing business with you." I didn't even linger around to hear how badly Magnus wanted to whine about the latest turn of events. I headed straight to bed, especially since I was sobering up unfortunately rapidly. The bed was actually of a surprisingly good quality and I did sleep rather well. I noted the lack of a hangover, not that I expected one with how little I'd drunk the night prior. I had only my personal sense of restraint to thank, however. The more time I spent on the road the more tempting it was to get completely and utterly smashed.

In the morning I decided to pay the blacksmith a little visit, as I had made a prior note to do. He'd never suspect a woman like me to be capable of picking his locks so I felt safely distant from any accusations regarding the night prior. With a bit of luck and some coin I could even learn a trick or two about what made his locks so sturdy. I just had to choose my words carefully so as not to let on more than I was supposed to know.

I was only mildly surprised to enter his shop and come face to face

with a half orc. Half orcs were scarcely more than slaves up in Tarant and Cumbria wasn't well known for its racial tolerance. I kept my shock to myself and spoke with him, "Good day, sir. I heard from Mr. Gurloes over in Shrouded Hills that you might know a thing or two about lock picking. I was wondering if you'd train me."

He paused for several moments before recognition slowly dawned over his face, false or not. "Ah... right, Mr. Gurloes, yes. I think I may have met him once or twice. Uh... anyway, yes, I could train you if you'd like. I want 500 coin up front though, as a training fee." *Name dropping is always a splendid way to avoid suspicion.*

The price was typical so I accepted it. I didn't really have much choice in the matter, it wasn't exactly negotiable. I'd been 'gambling' the night before anyway. "That is acceptable. I am ready to be trained." I handed him the coin.

"Thanks."

He takes the coin from me.

"Here, let me show you some tricks."

He proceeds to expand my knowledge of locking mechanism variations in detail.

"Alright, Samantha Colburn... you have it."

"Thank you. Now, where would I find the Master Locksmith?" I had a feeling that he'd be more sociable than Sammie. Anybody would have to be more sociable than Sammie, except perhaps for Garrick Stout. When I thought about it I began to wonder if many masters allowed their skill and renown to go to their heads. Then it occurred to me that I was now a master myself and perhaps the matter did make my head a tad large.

Looking slightly amused.

"I know right where that one is. J.T. Morgan is who you want. He's easy to find right now, since he is serving a life sentence at the docks."

So to learn how to better pick locks I need to break into prison? Sounds like quite the contradiction. I knew right where that prison was and I had no present desire to return there. "It sounds as if I'll need it! Thank you for my training. Goodbye." The blacksmith wished me well and I was off to deliver a statue. I could tell that Magnus was still fuming about the night prior, not that improving my lockpicking skills would make him terribly happy either.

I strolled back across the train tracks and the shallow portion of the nearby river, towards where I remembered finding D'ak Taan's camp previously. Unsurprisingly, it seemed like D'ak Taan didn't remember me until I tossed him the statue. "Here's the hedgewizard's statue. Pay me." There was no need to be anything but blunt. I almost liked that about thieves.

"Very nicely done. You've earned these items... No, you're just too damned evil for my tastes..."

I handed the statue over to him and received the mayor's ceremonial dagger in return, along with a small handful of other things. Magnus finally threw up his hands. "No, you're just too damned evil for my tastes..." he turned and began walking away.

"Magnus!" I called after him, "You're leaving? What's gotten into you? After all we've been through are you saying you're going to abandon our friendship?"

He didn't even sound angry anymore, he was more sad. "Yes, that's exactly what I'm saying. If you think that makes me a hypocrite or a terrible person then so be it, you're not the most wonderful person yourself. You steal, you lie, you cheat people, you break into people's homes and take the things they've earned. If I'd known what kind of person you were when I first met you I would never have gone with you in the first place."

I looked down at him, even moreso than I normally did considering he was a dwarf, "...and you seem to have a preternatural love for violence, which is a far greater offense than any of the minor ones I might commit as a matter of habit or for survival." *Why now, Magnus? You complained a lot, but still... I thought we were friends...*

I was actually surprised at Magnus' restraint. I knew he was angry, but he didn't let it show in the slightest. "That's right, I am willing to kill for what I believe in. I'm willing to stand up for what's right and stand against what's wrong."

Virgil finally stepped in, "I've had it with you, dwarf. You've been nothing but rude to the both of us from the first time we met you. You obviously don't know the first thing about what the world is

really like, so go ahead and leave if you think so little of us. You sure didn't think little of us when you were practically on your knees begging for help in killing off the Schuylers... and what was that all about, anyway? Those dwarves weren't your clan and you knew it, but you still gave that speech of yours and begged us to help. You're just as selfish as anybody else, you only pretend to be better. Sometimes I think you actually believe the rubbish that you're saying."

Virgil... you're not helping... Although Virgil wasn't really wrong, I could feel him pushing Magnus away further. I wanted to soften the blow of his words, but I knew it was too late... the best I could yet hope for was at least having Magnus leave peacefully. "Magnus... maybe it really is better if we part ways here. You and I see the world in a different light, and that's not going to suddenly change. I don't really think you're a bad person, and you have to know that I'm not really that bad either. We just have different things that are important to us, and those things happen to be in direct conflict with each other. As long as that's true, we'll just continue to be a thorn in each others' sides. Perhaps, in time, one of us will have a change of heart and we can travel together again."

Magnus sighed, "I'd like that. I'd like to believe that I wasn't wrong about you. I think we do need to spend some time apart for at least awhile, though. Good day to you."

"Goodbye, Magnus." I felt guilty for having pushed his buttons so, and no matter how much I thought it was for the best it still made me sad. *Do I really mean that little to you? After everything we made together, after I helped you avenge those undead dwarves...?* I had to convince myself that it was for the best. With assassins all around me and the law clearly not on my side I needed companions I could trust to stick by me no matter what, and I needed to have them with me as friends, not as reminders of my former life. I tried reassuring myself despite the sadness I suddenly felt at his departure. *In the end it's for the best.* I thought it over and over, yet still couldn't manage to convince myself.

No matter how many times I'd hoped he would leave, I could only feel sadness when it finally happened. I felt insulted, abandoned, and

betrayed. I wouldn't show it in the slightest, though. My eyes burned, but still I held back the tears. *Then I suppose this is goodbye, Magnus. Good luck finding your lost clan.*

Chapter the Twenty Seventh:

How Not To Deal With Rejection

I was silent after parting ways with Magnus. Virgil tried to strike up conversation, perhaps to make me feel better, but I remained unresponsive. "Looks like it's just the two of us again, Samantha. I don't really mind, though." I didn't even look at him as he spoke. I just kept walking, and he kept following. "We make a good team, don't we? ...I think we do." He sighed at my unresponsiveness. It wasn't his fault, certainly, but I really needed some time to think and I was in no mood to chat. I did feel bad about it, though. As much as I didn't want to talk to anybody, there was one last thing I had to take care of before leaving Black Root and I didn't really want to stick around.

I knocked on the door to the mayor's mansion and his half ogre guard let me in once again. I walked straight over to the mayor, ceremonial dagger in hand, and it struck me just how useless the half ogre servant was. Chukka would never have allowed me to approach Mr. Bates in such a fashion. This half ogre must have been one of those decorative ones. I looked at the mayor with narrowed eyes, "I have retrieved your dagger."

"Excellent! Give it to me and I'll have the thieves arrested at once." *I'm not leaving without those bloody taxes.* "Your guards can't even protect you from petty thieves."

He sighed, unsure of himself. He was far too weak to be the mayor of a town, but that would explain all the smuggling and piracy. "Your point is well taken, but what would you have me do?"

I'd have you give me the bloody tax money. "Give me the taxes and align yourself with Cumbria."

He didn't even have to think before responding. It was almost as

though he liked being told what to do, or that dagger meant a whole lot to him. "I accept your proposal - if you return the ceremonial dagger to me."

I handed it to him gently. "Here is your dagger, sir."

"Thank you Samantha Colburn. Your resourcefulness amazes me."

He handed off a chest full of gold in return. It was a tad heavy so I gave it to Virgil to carry. "You have been most kind, sir. I will let myself out." Having accomplished what I set out to do, I left. I certainly wasn't in a talkative mood.

Without stopping to rest I immediately left for Dernholm.

Unfortunately for Virgil and I, Cumbrian skies were not known for being sunny or clear. Not more than a day into our journey Southward it started to rain gently and the rain continued until we reached Dernholm. I was just thankful that it wasn't a complete downpour. It was damp and unpleasant, but nothing that made it overly difficult to stay warm at night.

Dernholm looked like it hadn't changed at all in the month or so it had been since I last visited. The townsfolk were still dirty, the houses still looked like shacks about to fall over in the next wind, and filth cluttered the streets. Walking around a town like Dernholm with a chest full of gold sounded like a bad idea if I'd ever heard one so I wasted no time in gaining audience with King Praetor. He spotted the large chest that Virgil was carrying straight away. Virgil handed it off to a guard who checked its contents before carrying it carefully over to the King.

"Excellent! Thank you for retrieving the taxes. Here's your share."

"Anything else, milord?" It was practically a habit for me to constantly search for more opportunities for easy coin. Nevermind that I was close enough to the King I could probably have pickpocketed him and had nobody catch on.

The King seemed to forget himself for just a moment, "There's something of a... personal nature..." then he stopped suddenly as if remembering himself.

I stammered, "Uh... you were saying...?"

"No, no. This is an internal matter. I will find another way."

He thinks for a moment.

"Perhaps I could use your services at a later date, though."

"Until later, then." *I suppose it's even more easy coin if I ever find myself back in this horrible town.* With my official business concluded I headed directly for the bar. My mood was one that could only be cured by copious amounts of alcohol. "One shot of whiskey, bartender." I somewhat hoped that one night of drinking heavily would somehow cure my woes.

"That'll be 2 coin."

2 coin was nothing to me. "Certainly. Here you are, sir." Neither was 4 coin, 6 coin, or 8 coin. My whiskey binge simply didn't stop until I was damn near ready to fall off of the bar stool I was seated upon.

"Here you are miss."

"uh... t-th-tanks." I slurred at the bartender, attempting to thank him for what really ought to have been my final drink. I can't say that I would've even stopped there if my drunken buffonery hadn't landed me into other trouble. It was at that point that I actually did fall off of my barstool and I collided with the gnome minding his own business just next to me. As I was quite drunk this seemed like a natural opportunity to strike up conversation.

"H-hi... gnowmm... you know anything 'bout this place?"

He took a step away to distance himself from the awful stench on my breath. "Please keep to yourself, madam. Can't you let a bloke enjoy his ale...?"

His obvious disinterest would only be off putting to the sober. "Uh... I no wanna bother you... just... askin' question..."

"Yeah? Well, here's a simple question for you. What is someone like you doing all the way out here in the middle of this disreputable kingdom? Not exactly the kind of place that someone goes for a holiday..."

"It aaalllll shtarted when I rran away from Caladonn... never shoulda bought that shtupid zzerplin ticket. That... damned zheffyr... crashed... ev'rybody died... Horace... Victoria... Wilhemina... I'm gonna mish them."

The gnome stared at me curiously. Virgil cleared his throat quite purposefully, trying to gently guide me away from the bar but I

slapped his hands away, intent on continuing my story. "That'sh... ancient hishtory now, though... I guesh... if it weren't for that... I never woulda met ol' Virgil here... an' I'm glad I met Virgil. He'sh really nice to me, not many people are nice to me. We've been all over together... I think... we're gonna go see some dwarfs when we're done here. The... their... the black... somethin'... black mitten... dwarfs."

The gnome looks at me, considering my story.

"So you're saying that it was you who survived the IFS Zephyr crash?"

My stupidity knew no bounds at that moment. "Uh... yeah!" Other than that unfortunate newspaper story I'd been keeping my story to myself quite well, but in that moment of weakness I didn't have the foresight to simply shut my damn fool mouth.

He is quiet for a long while. Then...

"Well, it sounds to me like you might be in need of some help. Sounds like you might need someone to watch your back."

He looks away.

"My name's Vollinger..."

"Uh... why you want to help me, Vollinjer?" I was so drunk that everything was confusing to me... even the color of the bar stool I'd fallen off of.

He doesn't look at me.

"Every man's got his reasons, and sometimes those reasons are only his to know."

Then he looks at me, slightly turning his head.

"Plus, I didn't offer my help. I just said it sounded like you needed some."

It occurred to me that perhaps I reminded him of somebody, just as Jayna reminded me of Nathaniel. More than that, however, I was too drunk to either care or think clearly. "Uh... mebbe you want to join us?" I was lonely and vulnerable, and my drunkenness did little to alleviate either condition.

Virgil couldn't take it anymore. He finally took me aside, catching me as I stumbled drunkenly. "Samantha! I don't know about this gnome... there's something about him I just don't like! He seems awfully eager to go with us, especially after we've just met him!"

Articulation was not my strong suit, "Uh... I think he just different... he want to be friends."

"Yes, I know... but there's something about this gnome... I can't quite place my finger on it. Believe me... I've had a questionable sort of past and I know how to spot a bad seed. Trust me, Samantha Colburn, you want nothing to do with this gnome..."

"Mebbe, Virgil. I go talk to him..." Although I fully intended to give thought to what Virgil had said, I completely forgot about all of it once I got back to the bar.

Vollinger looked up at me curiously, "Is there a problem? Were you going to ask me something?"

I nodded happily. "You join us?" Virgil hissed.

He is silent, then sets down his drink.

"Sure, stranger. I'll join you. What's your name?"

"I called Samantha Colburn...!" The one upside to being drunk is that I could introduce myself without all the memories of old Merle surfacing.

"I see. Well, Samantha Colburn, it looks to be an interesting day. Who knows what we might see tomorrow?"

He gives me a long stare.

"Shall we be off?"

I thought about that and it occurred even to my drunken self that I ought not go anywhere when drunk. Sleeping it off sounded very warm and pleasant, however. "Mebbe we sleep first. I had a... drink... or two."

Vollinger eyed me curiously while Virgil eyed him curiously. I barely noticed either as I stumbled over to the innkeeper.

"What can I help you with."

"Me stay 'ere 'nite?" Although words were not my strong suit, it was lucky for me that the innkeeper was accustomed to dealing with others like me and worse.

"Oh, but of course, madam. That will be 25 coins, please." She held out her hand patiently.

Even while completely plastered I was never one to allow money to be spent without complaining about it. I shouted out, "Dat a lot!" Then, quieter, "Okay, here." I gave her the coins, taking my room key in return, and retired for the evening.

But of course I woke up with a pounding headache in the wee hours of the morning. That, compounded with finding a vaguely familiar gnome sleeping on the other side of the room, almost made me swear off of whiskey. Almost. I took a long, warm bath to soothe my nerves and hopefully recover from the past night's binge. I was feeling slightly better when I finished, though memories slowly came back to me about the odd gnome I now found myself traveling with. Virgil was right that there was something odd about him, but I really couldn't place what. I could tell he felt a certain shame in the reasons he had for tagging along and it made me curious. I was torn.

It was only natural to suspect something sinister, but the more curious part of me hoped that if I trusted him someday he might grow to trust me enough to share it with me. I knew I was being overly sentimental about somebody I'd only just met - and while completely drunk to boot - but I didn't much like the idea of telling him to get lost either. I'd been the one to ask him to come along, not the other way around, and it would've been incorrigible to ask him to leave so soon after.

I wasn't about to repeat the mistakes of the past, however. I wanted everything to be out on the table. If Vollinger didn't want to share his thoughts with me then so be it, but I wanted to be damn sure he knew exactly who I was before we even set foot outside of that inn. After getting dressed and gathering up my things from our inn room I wandered out into the bar with an eye for valuables. Much to my surprise I actually spotted something that I somewhat recognized. One slightly tipsy woman sitting at a table was wearing a very attractive looking amulet with a red eye in the center. I couldn't be certain, but I thought it looked a lot like the medallion of beauty Madam Lil had described to me.

Making sure that my new companion was looking I crept up behind the woman and snatched it quickly from around her neck. She continued sipping her drink, not even noticing me. I triumphantly looked back towards Vollinger and took a bow. He silently clapped for me. *I guess that answers that question.* At least I could be assured that Vollinger wouldn't get angry over every little indiscretion I committed. It wasn't long ago that I'd been thinking I needed a

companion I could trust and, while I couldn't be entirely sure about him, at least Vollinger didn't seem put off in the slightest by either my drunkenness or my thievery. A gnome that could tolerate vices like that would make a fine travelling companion for a time, whatever his reasons for following me might have been.

For my next trick I snuck over into Archibald's house, wondering just how many fool adventurers he and Gladys had duped since I was last in Dernholm. When he wasn't paying attention I slipped Gladys' ring right off his finger. It was quite the feat and I imagined I wouldn't have gotten away with it if the ring had fit him better. *Let's see you do that, Sammie.*

"You put on a wonderful show, madam. Your skills are quite good." Vollinger congratulated me as I left.

"Uh... thanks, Vollinger. How kind of you to notice." *Well, I am a master... Hmm. Perhaps Vollinger's not so bad after all...* The gnome was a mystery to me still, but that only made me even more interested in travelling with him. *Sorry, Virgil, I've got to go with my gut feeling on this one... he might have a rather rough temperament, but I think I could get along with this gnome.*

The several day stretch of constant, light rain was finally nearing an end. The sun pierced a few scattered clouds as I made my towards Gladys' house to give her the ring back. It was looking like a good day to start my journey back towards Black Root, and from there to Tarant. I gently pushed open the door to Gladys' house, letting myself in. Quiet, so as not to startle her, I spoke, "Gladys, I've brought your ring back. Archibald... gave it to me."

"He died?"

She looks sad.

"I see. Oh, well. I thank you, of course. May I please have the ring?" *Your little game is over, old woman, and now you know it.* "Of course, here it is."

"Thank you for your trouble," she creaked.

"It was no problem, madam. Good day to you." I was starting to feel quite good. I'd gotten the severe desire to drink out of the way, met a

new - if mysterious - friend, gotten Madam Lil's amulet, and even done my good deed for the day by putting Gladys' and Archibald's little game to rest. Since things were going so well I wanted to get an early start while the weather was improving. On the way out I passed by that familiar herbal scent once again... *Jayna...?*

I poked my head into her old house briefly, expecting to find it empty, and was quite startled to find her inside. I didn't know why or when she traveled all the way back here, but it made me quite sad. "Jayna! It's good to see you, darling, but what in blazes are you doing back here?!"

She looked down at the ground, biting her lip gently. "I, uh... Tarant is an awful big city... I think I'm just more comfortable here... even if I won't be learning that much."

I sighed. *Even if being around me will spoil her, I can't just let her waste her life in this dying town.* "Come with me, Jayna. I'm sorry I asked you to leave, I miss your company. You can't just stay here... I'll take you back to Tarant and I'll make good on my promise this time. We really will learn together."

"I would if you had less people with you."

She glared at the gnome following me, then looked back at me with a rather resolute stare. "I... see..." I stammered. *Even Jayna doesn't like Vollinger... though I suppose she's afraid of just about everything. He isn't that bad, is he?* I was sad, but as much as I liked Jayna, I didn't feel right asking Vollinger to leave in favor of her. The rational part of my mind knew it would be best for me to leave Jayna to her life, and continue on with mine. She might not be accomplishing much in Dernholm, but at least she was still her... she didn't have to deal with all of the violence and thievery that surrounded me. It really wasn't an easy decision, but finally I spoke once again. "All right, Jayna. I'm sorry to hear that. I've gotten ahold of some technical manuals back in Tarant, I'll try and make it back this way to give some to you. Please... take care of yourself."

She smiled weakly, tears forming in her eyes. I was holding back my own tears as well, and the sight of hers made it all the more difficult. "You take care as well, Samantha. I'll certainly be thinking about you. Traveling with you was quite an enjoyable adventure for me."

"Good bye, Jayna." It felt as though I was saying goodbye to Nathaniel. The rational part of me warred with the sentimental part, and I wanted to cry out... to tell her just how much I enjoyed her company, and how sad it made me that she was wasting away here. *I know it's for the best, but that doesn't make this any less painful.* I turned and departed before my emotions became too much for me to handle. *Why does everything make me feel so damned sad? Am I really such a weak person?* The three of us made for Black Root.

Chapter the Twenty Eighth: The Importance Of Being Kind To Your Fellow Man

The journey back to Black Root was thankfully uneventful, which gave me time to sort out all of my thoughts. I was still upset about seeing Jayna waste away in Dernholm, and even worse I was powerless to do anything about it. That powerlessness made me feel weak and vulnerable. I felt as though I should've been able to do more for the poor girl.

On top of that, I still hadn't fully made up my mind about Vollinger. I wanted to like him, and he certainly made himself likeable, but I trusted Virgil too much to completely ignore his opinion. I figured I'd have a good, long chat with Virgil on the subject when I got the chance. It was the least I could do for a friend. In the meantime I was just grateful that Vollinger was polite and didn't seem to mind my occasionally larcenous behavior.

He seemed fairly reliable, too. Although I disliked his use of guns, simply because I find guns distasteful, at least he seemed skilled with them and more than willing to fight to defend me. There wasn't a whole lot more I could ask out of a travelling companion. Not everybody in the world could be another Virgil, so perhaps I was just being overly picky. The extra help certainly couldn't hurt.

I headed directly for the train station upon arriving in Black Root, thinking to check up on the schedule and make my plans from there. Not halfway to the station, however, a woman grabbed Virgil's arm and cried out, "Liam?!"

Virgil stared at her perplexed and the expression on my face wasn't any more understanding. "Excuse me, madam, I would be grateful if

you'd unhand Virgil."

She suddenly turned red, horribly embarrassed, "Oh, I'm so sorry! It's just... a friend of mine is worried about her missing son, and this young man here looked so much like him..."

There are problems that I can easily ignore, and this is not one of them.
"You say her son is missing? What's his name?"

She started to regain her composure at my apparent interest. "Liam Cameron... do you know him?"

I shook my head sadly, "I can't say that I do, but I'm something of an adventurer these days... though I rather loathe the term. Perhaps I could be of assistance. Would you direct me to Mrs. Cameron's house that I might ask her about it?"

The lady seemed rather suddenly surprised, and frankly so did Virgil. *Come now... is my willingness to help really that surprising?* "Of course, madam. Her house is just down the street there, it'll be the first house on your right. If you don't mind, I'm going to continue my search..."

"Of course." I nodded to her politely and headed off in the direction she'd pointed. I found the house easily enough and knocked on the door. Before long a woman answered, not much older than myself. Her face showed clear signs of worry. "Mrs. Cameron? I came to ask you anything you could tell me about your son."

"My son is Liam Cameron, the inventor. I haven't seen him in nearly two months. You just sound like him... I was wondering if you passed by his workshop on your travels?"

This was sounding rather concerning, though admittedly it wasn't exactly what I expected when I heard he was missing. "His workshop? I'm afraid I must have come along a different route."

She clutched her hands against her chest, "He's a tinkerer, like his father before him. Always working on some new gadget. He built himself a workshop about three day's travel into the woods, so he wouldn't be disturbed."

I was a bit confused, but I wanted to put this woman's mind at ease,

"And you haven't seen him in a while?"

"His normal routine was to trek back here once a month to visit me and stock up on supplies. It's been nearly two, and I haven't heard a thing. What with the strange happenings going on in the woods, I'm very worried."

Strange happenings? That's not a good sign at all... "I see why you would be concerned. Would you like me to find him?"

She looked puzzled for a moment and took a closer look at me and my companions. She saw the dagger resting on my hip, Virgil's plate armor, and the gun poking out of Vollinger's pocket. She suddenly became very excited

"Would you?! I'd be so grateful! I realize it's a mother's place to worry, but this is so unlike Liam. I'd appreciate any attempt you could make to locate him."

I pulled out my map and handed it to her, "Here, show me on my map where his workshop is."

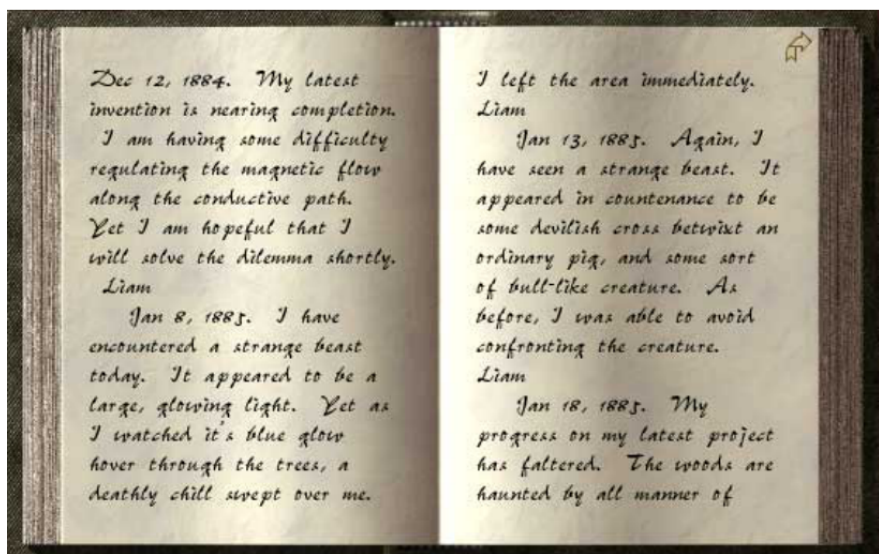
She looked it over carefully, "Oh. Here. It's right here," she said pointing to a spot just Southwest of Black Root.

"Very well, madam. I will bring you news." She thanked me once more and I departed Black Root straight for the workshop she pointed out to me.



The location she'd pointed to on the map was quite accurate and I found the workshop with little difficulty. I became very concerned on my arrival, however. The workshop seemed completely abandoned. The door was unlocked and slightly rotted, and the inside of the shack was in complete disarray. It would only make sense for an inventor's workshop to be cluttered, but it looked like it had been

ransacked by thieves. That wouldn't be surprising for an abandoned shack out in the woods, but the shack wasn't supposed to have been abandoned. The only thing of note that I found was a journal lying open on a desk. I flipped through it, trying to find out what I could.



strange beasts. I must discover what has happened and try to set it to rights. Liam.

Jan 29, 1885. I have found it! After much searching of the forest, I found the demon light from which the beasts are emanating. It appears to be some type of vortex or portal. The beasts come forth from its interior with what appears to be no set order. I have some scrolls to disperse magick on hand. I pray they are enough to destroy the portal. Liam.

Feb 4, 1885. Alas! The scroll was a failure. It seems my technological demeanor has become such that even the smallest of magicks will no longer function in my presence. I sustained minor wounds doing battle with a beastly lizard creature. I must design a mechanical means of closing the portal. Liam.

Feb 7, 1885. I must make haste! I believe the contraption I have put aside may be my only hope! I have designed a mechanism that, when employed, should cap the portal, sealing it from this side. I need only make a few more adjustments and it will be ready. Liam.

Feb 10, 1885. It is ready! I have given it the simple nomenclature 'Magick Trap'. I have made two, one as a reserve. I leave immediately to seal the portal. I shall try my best to avoid the creatures roaming rampant through the wood. If I fail, I beg those who read this journal to return it to my mother in Black Root. May the gods preserve us. Liam Cameron.

I sighed, cursing myself for not having arrived sooner. I had so badly wanted to save the poor boy and I was all but certain he was now dead. Useless thoughts raced through my mind, like if I'd only happened by on my way out of Shrouded Hills I could've saved poor Liam. It did me no good to dwell on it, however. I picked open the lock on a nearby chest and pulled out the Magick Trap that Liam had invented, determined to do what Liam had given his life for. I set out on the path leading into the woods that Liam had marked to point the way to the portal.

I paused when I came across Liam's decaying body in the middle of the path he'd made. I could see the portal in the distance, and the malevolent creatures that surrounded it. It looked as though Liam had been wounded and tried to escape, but they chased him and finished him off here. I stooped down, collecting my thoughts for a brief moment. Rage overcame me.

There was a rather large axe lying on the ground next to Liam, clearly of advanced technological construction. The handle was made of solid, sturdy oak like many a quality axe, but the blade itself was even more marvelous. It seemed to be specially treated in some fashion, perhaps hollowed out with some kind of chemicals or machinery inside. The blade was warm to the touch and when I swung the axe it heated up red hot in an instant, searing and charring anything it touched. *Yes... this will do nicely. Liam, I will avenge you.* With my hands firmly gripping the oak handle I charged forward towards the portal.

The creatures set upon me near instantly. In addition to the ferocious lizards that Liam had mentioned in his journal there were also several strange, floating jellyfish. They were as fast as they were vicious and their tentacles were coated in a thick, acidic slime that burned the skin and tore holes in any clothing or armor they touched. They even ate through the electrically resistant plate I had made for Virgil.

Where have these horrendous beasts come from?! I dodged around their attacks as best as I could, which was unfortunately quite poorly. Whenever I could I buried Liam's axe right where it counted, splitting lizards in half effortlessly and burning through the membranes covering the floating jellyfish. For each beast that I felled another would crawl through the portal, horrible screeches issuing from their maws.

I knew not where they were coming from nor when the torrent would end, but I never gave up. I fought endlessly and tirelessly, chopping the creatures apart one by one as they came pouring out of the portal. My wounds were many and great, and I only survived thanks to Virgil's magickal efforts. I didn't even pause long enough from my onslaught to salve over my own wounds. Every now and then, amidst the gnashing of teeth and ripping of flesh, I would hear another shot ring out from Vollinger's gun and another beast would fall only to be replaced moments later. *Liam must have been very brave indeed to attempt this task by himself.*

At long last, after battling several dozen of the hideous creatures, their flow seemed to cease temporarily. Without hesitation I took the

single moment of respite I had and placed Liam's Magick Trap over the portal. The portal wavered and flickered, twisting around uncertainly. Finally it shattered and over a thousand tiny bits exploded outward before being sucked back into nothingness. I stood next to the now closed portal on top of over a hundred corpses, victorious.

"Thank you, Virgil... Vollinger. I couldn't have done it without you two."

Virgil patted me on the shoulder gently so as not to aggravate my wounds. "It was the right thing to do, madam. Who knows what damage those creatures could've brought to Black Root or even Tarant if they got far enough."

"Indeed," Vollinger added, "One of those things could've invaded the very next inn we sleep in if we hadn't done something to stop them." I smiled at both of them weakly and began the slow and sad journey back to Black Root. I had to tell Mrs. Cameron what became of her son. She deserved to know, no matter how much I hated that I had to be the one to tell her.

Although journeying through the wilderness was no way to heal the wounds that plagued me, I would not slow my journey. Virgil helped out by healing me when he could, though his spells were often ineffectual. I supposed that I, too, was growing in my technological demeanor and soon Virgil would be unable to work magick in my presence at all. That was a grim thought. When I arrived at Black Root I went straight to Mrs. Cameron's house and knocked on her door.

She invited me inside before worriedly asking, "Do you have news of Liam?" She looked so hopeful, her eyes pleading to me for good news.

Unfortunately, I had none. "I am sorry. He was killed by one of the beasts roaming the forest."

She lets out a long, piercing cry.

"My baby! My poor baby!"

Sobs into her apron.

"...I'm all alone. I have no one left... No one."

I felt true sympathy for the poor woman. There seemed to be almost nothing I could say that would lessen the pain of her loss, but I had to try. "He died trying to stop the creatures. He was a hero!"

She didn't seem convinced, she could only focus on the pain she was feeling, "But they killed him and they still roam! His death was in vain..."

I shook my head and grabbed ahold of her shoulders, looking her straight in the eye, "No! Not in vain. It was his creation that enabled me to stop them."

Her sobs slowed and she started to look up at me more hopefully, "Truly? ...His death was not in vain?"

I assured her as best as I could, "If not for your son, this city would have been overrun with beasts!" Virgil nodded in agreement, as did Vollinger.

"Thank you. Thank you for taking such risks to search for my son. Here. Take this chapeau as a small token of my gratitude. It was one of Liam's early inventions."

I accepted her gift gracefully, "Thank you. I am sorry for your loss. Goodbye." I left her to her sadness.

Despite my leaving I couldn't put her from my mind. The horror and despair in her voice when I told her the bad news was all too real to me. I wandered away from the town along the water's edge, lost in my thoughts. She wasn't the only one to have lost somebody dear to her, only she didn't look like she was about to run away from Black Root over it. *Does it make me a bad person for running away?* I already knew the answer.

Before I could have too much time to dwell on it I was jolted from my reverie by a strange little halfling wearing nothing but a loincloth. It was so absurd to encounter such a man so close to town that I rubbed my eyes and looked again to make sure I was not hallucinating. He looked up at me curiously, "Hello, youngling. Would you like to play a game?"

Regardless of how confused I was, at least the strange little man was

taking my mind off of its previous train of thought. I welcomed that aspect of it, even though I had no idea what the hell was going on. I proceeded cautiously, "What kind of game, halfling?"

"Oh, an old game, to be sure. And a fun one, if ye be make of the right stuff. You think you're game, do ye?"

Although he technically had answered my question, I was only further confused, "What are the rules?"

He shrugged, "The rules? Rules? Well, if ye must know... I'll be asking you a question, and if ye be a'knowin' the answer, then the game continues. If not, the game is over. Agreed?"

I was never one to turn down a game of wits, but I had to be clear, "What do you mean, 'the game continues'?"

"Hmmm. Not one to take chances, eh? Well, let's just say that if you be a smart lass, you get to keep testing those brains... I'll say no more, out of respect to the old ways..."

"Fine. I'm in." I certainly wasn't going to back down, though I suspected the strange little halfling's questions wouldn't be quite as easy as the ones I routinely answered in pubs. I was right.

The halfling grinned wickedly, "Ha! Good, then, we'll begin straight off. One question I'll ask, and one answer there be. The wise man will spot what the dullard won't see."

"A painted face, hands with no bones. My oldest brother was made of stones. What am I?"

It took some thinking, but I arrived at the answer shortly enough. "A clock. Numbers are painted on its face, its hands have no bones, and the first timepieces were stone sundials."

"Correct!" he beamed, "Ye seem to be a resourceful one... would ye like to continue?"

I didn't even hesitate, "Of course."

"Good sport! Well, then, if ye follow to the west, just beyond the camp of thieves, ye will find an ancient stand of trees that some call the Withered Grove. There another of our kind awaits. Good luck to you."

"Thank you. I'll be on my way." Although the game itself intrigued me, I was ecstatic for the distraction it provided. I didn't need to be

thinking about my past any more than I already had. I sought out the next strange halfling to continue the game, finding him easily from the first halfling's directions.

He looked me up and down as I arrived, silently judging me, "Ah... a true player. Not one we've seen in many years, and none so promising. Are ye ready for the next question, lass?"

This was all getting very interesting and also somewhat alarming. I cursed myself for my insatiable curiosity. "Yes. Please continue."
"That's the spirit! Though before we begin, I feel I must tell you... this game is an old and mysterious one. Let it be known that the stakes are always high, as are the rewards..."
That didn't sound pleasant, though I hardly suspected anything he had to say would stop me, "What exactly are the stakes?"

He looked upset that I had asked. "No! I've said too much already. There are things not meant to be said, and the price for saying them is one I'm not about to pay... this world is home to things other than just you and I..."

I'm trying to get my mind off of the damned forest, already. "Whatever you say, halfling. Let's get started."

"A brave one you are. Well done. You might just win this yet. The question is... Death to one, while birthing another; trees begin to shiver around its half-brother. What am I?"

Death to one while birthing another made me think of the seasons, as when each one ends a new one begins. Shivering trees could only mean fall, so the answer had to be... "The spring."

"Well, well, well. Seems like a long time since any soul played this well. Just north of here you will find the stony ground. There you will find the last of us. Think on this..."

"Thank you for the advice. I'll be on my way." *I didn't come this far to stop now.* I sought out the next strange little halfling to continue their game.

He, too, appraised me as I neared him. "So. It seems we have a smart one, eh? I've stood many nights here among the stones waiting for one such as you. And yet, I hesitate... I've seen many fail. You can still turn back..."

"I've come this far. Let's finish this." I wasn't about to be talked down, no matter what the price. There was a fair bit of overconfidence in my words, to be sure, but everybody has their flaws.

He sighed, almost sadly. "Very well. What's done is done and can be no other way. Whatever the outcome, know that the stones and I and mine will remember you."

The whole thing was starting to sound quite frightening. I didn't get the impression that the halfling was joking. "Let's get to the question." "Causing wounds, and cleansing. History dies from its rinsing. Life or scars is its blessing. What am I?"

I immediately thought of fire when he mentioned the death of history, picturing the burning of books in my mind, I just had to make sure it fit the rest of the riddle before saying it aloud. Fire certainly caused plenty of wounds, but it could also be used to cleanse metallic implements before using them surgically. Fire did give life via its warmth, but it could also cause grave scars. It seemed to fit, "Fire."

"Well done, young one. Few are those who win the old game. You have earned this prize. Use it only in times of the gravest danger. Remember us, and when you think you're alone... we will be there." I blinked, confused, "Thank you." I took the small, white gem from his outstretched hand and placed it in my pocket. It made me just a little bit uncomfortable to keep it in my presence so I knew it had a magickal bent to it. Confused, I traveled back into town and reserved tickets on the next train to Tarant. *What would've happened if I answered incorrectly?*

The train wouldn't be arriving for another few hours, so I took the time to chat with Mr. Ogg once more. We spent a few minutes catching up and exchanging various small talk before I finally broached the subject of training. "I've noticed that I tend to take more hits than I avoid when things get a little rough... do you think you could teach me a thing or two about dodging?"

He was all business on the matter of training, "500 coins." I handed them to him happily and he showed me a few tricks. After he went over it I felt quite a bit more confident in my ability to dodge blows.

"Who could train me to be a master of dodge?"

"Incredible as it may seem, the Dodge Master is a blind hermit named Adkin Chambers. He was blinded and disfigured in a duel by an unchivalrous blow that was delivered after he had yielded. Such things are expected in war, but not in a trial of arms. Now he hides himself from society on the outskirts of Stillwater."

If I were to seek training from this mysterious man I was going to need all the information I could get. "Tell me more about this duel." "Chambers was blinded in a duel with Garrick Stout. Chambers was defending the honor of his betrothed... a beautiful and virtuous woman known as Lady Druella. The details are shameful to me and I will not speak of them. Trial by combat proved Stout's innocence, as he was victorious. However, he disgraced himself by attacking after his opponent had yielded."

Garrick Stout, pompous master of melee. What an interesting tale. "Thank you! You have been most helpful. If you'll pardon me, I, once again, have a train to catch."

Not wanting my mind to wander any further than it had been recently I elected to take a short nap on the train ride to Tarant. Virgil chatted with Vollinger for awhile and it seemed like they were starting to warm up to one another even without my intervention. There were too many things to be positive about for me to continue thinking about things that upset me.

Once we arrived in Tarant I made a quick stop by the gypsy woman to ask her about the amulet I'd pilfered in Dernholm. For a small fee she assured me that it was a medallion of beauty and I went straight to Madam Lil's to recoup the fee I'd paid and much more. "Good evening, Madam Lil. I've brought your medallion."

"Shh! You're amazing! Let me see it!"

She takes the medallion from me.

"It's gorgeous! Thank you so much..."

Still staring in awe at the medallion.

"...Go ahead, tell me which you'd like: the coin or the girls... you definitely earned it."

I glanced at Vollinger briefly to make sure he didn't think I'd requested the latter option or anything silly like that. He didn't seem

to really notice or care. "...as I mentioned before, I'd really prefer the coin."

She opened up her purse, counting out the full 600 coins and then handing them to me. After quickly double checking her count I handed her the amulet and she hastily snapped it around her neck. True to its supposed function it seemed to make her look all the more alluring, but in a very mysterious fashion. Perhaps that was a part of its magick, since I so often found myself compelled to sate my curiosity. Naturally she would seem more interesting to me if she looked somehow mysterious. I shrugged it off, becoming disinterested in it as quickly as I'd thought of it. Magick was of little concern to me.



"Virgil, I think I'm finally ready. It's time for us to investigate the Black Mountain Mines."

"Yes," he sighed heavily, "I think that would be wise." *I just bloody hope we don't wind up like the rest of Bates' investigators.*

Chapter the Twenty Ninth: A Glimpse Behind the Curtain May Spoil the Surprise

Even my light steps echoed loudly throughout the empty, hollowed out chamber. I gazed outward in awe at the room, crafted untold numbers of years ago by Black Mountain Dwarves. When Virgil and Vollinger caught up the sounds their feet made against the polished rock beneath were loud enough to startle me with each step. I didn't know exactly what I was expecting, but I certainly hadn't expected the mines to be so... empty.

There were no dwarves to greet me at the entrance, no proud, stout guards lining the entry hall to make certain I would be on my best behavior. Instead there was only scrap, rudimentary barricades blocking my way as if they were insulting the great stone cavern around them. The cautionary greetings that should have been shouted by dwarves were replaced with the gentle echo of squeaks, whines, and light growls.

A family of wolves darted around a nearby corner, attacking. I drew my axe in defense, knowing that it was too late to avoid combat now. *Stupid animals... I don't mean you any harm, if you'd let me pass you could have lived.* I regretted having to kill them. My axe swept in wide, powerful arcs surprising even myself at the skill with which I struck. The wolves fell before me having stood not even a shred of a chance, their corpses bleeding at my feet. Although I've never been a terribly religious person I still said a brief prayer for them.

Continuing down the thick stone passage I discovered a wide staircase to be the only path that lead further into the mines. There

were other paths I could've taken had it not been for the haphazard trash that blocked the way. Normally piles of junk were good to me - I could scavenge them for parts - but here they were just nasty bits of rotted wood and rusted metal.

The bottom of the winding staircase revealed only more twisting passageways for me to follow, becoming all the more hopelessly lost with each successive turn. Suddenly, from out of the darkness, rats pounced. I knew not what could make rats so large nor aggressive, but the unfortunate truth in the matter was that I had cause to defend myself yet again. After no more strikes from my axe than there had been rats, I was already rounding the next corner.

A part of me had expected even more things eager to rip and tear at my flesh, but all I found were more dull, stone passageways. Vents chiseled into the stone walls lead to an ancient furnace, or perhaps to the molten depths of the Black Mountain from which these mines and their dwarves had taken their name. The warmth that issued from them was a small comfort in the cold, dead halls I tread upon.

As I turned another corner I caught movement just at the edge of my awareness. I turned, startled to find a mound of living rock standing up to face me. I took a step back, frightened at this new kind of creature or thing that I had never encountered before. The deafening bang of Vollinger's gun sounded out and a thick chip of stone slid off of the creature's side, yet still it lumbered towards me. I suspected Vollinger had the right idea.

I drew my axe and stared at the creature as it slowly stalked ever closer. When it was near enough it reached out a stone fist and tried to slam me against the wall, but I was too fast. Reflex took over and I darted underneath its surprisingly fast arm, whirling around and sinking my axe into the side of its leg. The leg cracked where my blow contacted it, eventually splintering under the weight of solid rock.

The creature still stood, even on only a single leg. It swiveled to try and strike at me again, but there would be no hesitation on my part. I had come around fully to the creature's backside and I took the opening that afforded me. I swung my axe high over my head,

bringing it down upon the back of the creature's stony skull. As happened before, the stone cracked and shattered, then at last the creature fell to the ground lifelessly. *Exactly how stone should be: unmoving.* The sooner I pressed on the sooner I would be safely back in Tarant, so pressing on is exactly what I did.

As if the rock creature had been the embodiment of the mines themselves, its death sent the lifeless mines into a frenzy. Activity exploded around every corner as all manner of beasts sprung to life, attacking the first thing they saw - me. My axe served me well and I clung to it tightly. It was my life preserver in the sea of violence I found myself rapidly drowning in.

"Your Combat skills are most effective, madam."

It seemed as though Vollinger was quite impressed with how I'd been handling myself. "Thank you, kind sir. It's good of you to notice, even if I'm not always proud of it."

He shrugged casually, "We cannot all be paragons of what society demands of us. I think it is admirable that you do what it takes to survive in this often cruel and underestimated world of ours."

Although I really didn't feel that hacking things to bits was something to be complimented over, I still smiled at Vollinger's thoughtfulness. "Well... I appreciate the compliment." It surprised me just how elaborately Vollinger could speak when he wanted to. It really was quite flattering.

As the stone passages wore on and on I repeatedly encountered a greater number of the tiny goblins known as Kite. Had I not known better I would've suspected these mines weren't home to dwarves after all, but it would've been utterly impossible for Kite to carve out such a spectacular structure. Whatever was once the home of dwarves, however, was clearly long abandoned and newly found by an aggressive Kite tribe.

It seemed that over the years the Kite even developed an agreement with the living stones that guarded the mines. I came across a small group of them sharing a fire with one such construct, although the second I was noticed they concentrated their efforts on attacking me. The Kite fell effortlessly beneath my axe, which would've made me

feel guilty if they hadn't attacked before even trying to determine if I was a friend or foe. The deep crimson stone golem, however, would not fall so easily.

Dust shook loose from the smooth stone ceiling above me as the creature stomped a path towards me. The cavern shook and shuddered, sending down another cascade of dust, as the golem's fists crashed into the stony floor and walls. I couldn't afford to be struck by one of those powerful limbs; it would only take a single blow to crush the life out of me. It was all I could do to simply avoid them, nevermind actually making my own attack against the creature.

Bravely, Virgil stepped up towards the creature and provided an excellent distraction. Angered at Virgil's chipping away, the creature turned and refocused its efforts. Luckily for Virgil the plate armor I'd crafted for him was able to absorb a substantial portion of the golem's strike. Virgil wasn't as adept at dodging as I and a sharp sound rang forth like a blacksmith's hammer solidly striking a length of steel against an anvil. "Are you all right?!" I shouted. *Damn you, getting yourself hurt again! I'm awful glad I gave you that armor.*

Virgil weakly groaned, "I think I'll live to see tomorrow."

I gritted my teeth and leapt at the golem, swinging my axe madly. I struck it several times before it turned to face me, then I darted around behind it and struck it several more times. I could feel my axe plinking uselessly off of its impenetrable exterior, but with each successive strike I knew I was digging further and further. Finally, the stone cracked and I took the opportunity to bury my axe where the creature was noticeably weakened. There was a loud crunch and then silence.

A puff of rock exploded from the creature's chest, launching stone fragments into the air. It was as though the creature had been imbued with a heart that finally burst after the onslaught I delivered. Then a loud crack echoed throughout the stony hall and the creature's head slowly slid from its shoulders, landing on the ground with a solid crack and rolling up against the wall before finally settling there. Our battle finally finished, I gently walked over to Virgil. I took the front plate off of his armor and applied some

healing salve to his wound before tending to the basic repairs his plate needed.

"Thank you, but that's not necessary." He whined.

"Well I think it is necessary, Virgil," I chided him, "I'll not have my companions sitting wounded in a corner for my sake." *Idiot. Don't think that I'm so heartless as to not care for your safety.*

He hung his head, "Well... thanks."

I merely smiled at him and handed him back his newly repaired plate before setting off to find the end of these damnable mines once and for all. *I'm not dead yet, Bates... and I don't plan on dying for your sake.*

A nasty feeling in the pit of my stomach developed when I spied a gnomish corpse on the ground just a bit further down the hall. I approached it carefully, desperately looking around to try and find what had killed it. The pool of blood it was lying in suggested it was no accident. After I was certain there was nothing to be afraid of in the immediate vicinity I crept up on the corpse and tried to find out what I could.

I noticed the gnome was carrying a few pieces of paper. Two of them were scrolls, one marked 'traps' and the other 'exit'. They seemed fairly straightforward. The third piece of paper was entirely more worrying. It was a simple note.

*Search for the target in the
abandoned mines of the Black
Mountain Clan. Any failures,
like those in Shrouded Hills,
will be met with the most severe
punishment.*

F.L.

My eyes drifted back towards the corpse and I spied the distinctive amulet of the Molochean Hand around the gnome's neck. I started to feel faint. "They're here... they know I came this way and they're already in the mine trying to kill me. I don't know who killed this one or why, but they're here for me!"

Virgil put his hand on my shoulder, "Please, calm down. It'll be all right. Obviously someone or something here doesn't welcome their presence any more than it welcomes ours, and we're holding our own so far. Those bastards have yet to succeed in their efforts against us so I say we continue forward. I'm certainly not afraid of them."

I still didn't feel right about the situation. "You may be correct, Virgil, it's just difficult for me. Of all the things that have ever happened to me I can't say having a group of ancient assassins after my life is one of them. I'm not used to this."

He sighed, "It'll be all right. Please," he begged, "trust me."

"Okay, Virgil," I nodded. "Let's continue then."

The very next room seemed to answer the questions I'd just been asking myself. There were even more corpses, three of them, and next to them were more of the rock creatures I'd been battling on my way in. *I suppose Virgil is right, then... those things really don't like the assassins either.* Although there was a certain danger in doing battle with them, they were a danger I was familiar with. Fighting against the rock creatures didn't scare me, though it probably should have. By extension I supposed that I ought not fear the Molocheans either if they were no match for the living rocks.

At the end of the room I at last came to the staircase leading back upwards. I climbed up it with satisfaction that I'd managed to defeat the abandoned mines, to succeed where the best thugs money could buy had failed. My heart sank when, at the top of the staircase, I saw no less than two more staircases leading straight back downward. *Damnation! When will these abominable stone halls come to an end?!* They had long ceased being a marvel and instead become an incredible annoyance.

I stared down both staircases carefully before making my decision on which one to pick. From the farther of the two I could swear I smelled the sweet scent of herbs and so I chose that one. It was a small reason to choose it, but I had no better reason to choose the other one so down I went. That sweet and yet pungent scent of herbs grew stronger, but all I could see with my eyes were a half dozen more unexplored passageways. I continued to follow the scent into the first passageway on the left side and I was greeted with a rather surprising and somewhat spectacular sight.

It seemed as though the dwarves had dug out the entire room with the express purpose of turning it into an underground garden. They'd dug a hole the entire length of the room all the way up to the surface of the mountain, letting in the cool air from above and filtering sunlight into the room. *Amazing... simply amazing.*

My momentary awe was interrupted as an arrow came sailing out from between the trees and planted itself in my side. I looked carefully and saw a shadowy elf taking aim at me for another shot. As

he fired I ducked behind another nearby tree and watched the arrow go sailing past before I charged through the foliage at him.

As an assassin, he was clearly inept. Once I closed in on him he became confused as to what he should do. He froze, frightened, and my axe separated a very vital part of him from the rest of his body. I closed my eyes in disgust at what I'd just done, but to my credit it was at least in self defense. *I really need to get a blackjack.*

Sighing, I continued onward to explore many more of the passageways. At the far end of the hall I saw several Kite stubbornly guarding a doorway. From what I could see at a distance it looked as though there were several bunks behind the doorway they guarded and it occurred to me that if I left them alone they would probably leave me alone. I wasn't going to sleep in Kite infested beds at the bottom of an abandoned dwarven mine anyhow. No good could come from killing them.

As I explored more of the passageways I came across many more corpses, and on each of them I found the distinguishing amulet of the Molochean Hand. *They really went all out to send their most bumbling, easily dispatched agents on this one, didn't they?* I finally figured out the puzzle that had been plaguing me when I stepped on a poisoned needle on the ground.

The entire floor was absolutely covered in traps, and the inept Molocheans had been killed by them. I supposed I'd either been lucky to avoid that fate so far, or else the Molocheans had done a spectacular job of unintentionally disarming them for me. I pulled out the scroll I'd found earlier marked 'traps' and rolled it open. *Idiots... why haven't they been using these?* I secretly hoped that it would work for me, despite my penchant for technology. Futzing around with electrical gizmos and picking locks didn't really seem to be a big deal, although Virgil's magicks argued otherwise.

I read the scroll aloud and the paper slowly crumbled beneath my fingers. The paper bits gently flitted to the ground and vanished as they touched the stone. I felt something slowly coming over me, like a gentle tingling upon my skin. The spell's effects made me uncomfortable, but at the same time a dim awareness came over me.

It was not unlike wearing spectacles for which I had no need. My eyes began to ache and I wondered if I could truly see any better.

Continuing onward, I began to spot several traps in the general vicinity of where I walked. I carefully pointed them out to my companions when I could and continued on. *I suppose, for once, I'm glad I don't get much of a chance to tinker around any further.* As I'd suspected, the traps were nearly everywhere. Walking through them was quite perilous even when I knew exactly where they were.

I wasn't sure how long the spell would last, so I left the heavily trapped area as quickly as I could. I went straight for the staircase I'd entered from and climbed it hastily. With a heavy sigh I descended right back down, this time taking the only other staircase I'd yet to venture down. At the bottom was a grand hall that I imagined would've contained the king's throne were the magnificent stone passages I traversed still occupied by dwarvenkind.

Instead I met up with the king of the Kite, or at least I suspected as much. There were nearly two dozen of the tiny bastards and they wasted no time in attacking as soon as they spotted me. It was lucky for me that it didn't take more than a single strike from my axe to fell each of them or I'd have been in real trouble. *Oh what I wouldn't give for an explosive grenade right about now.*

It wasn't clear whether there was actually Kite royalty or at least a chieftain or somesuch, but their aggression lead me to believe it was some important figure in their culture. I would've been punctured by several dozen of the tiny pins they use as arrows for their miniature bows, but the chapeau I had gotten from Mrs. Cameron activated and repelled them magnificently through the use of a magnetic field. It was truly a spectacular display of technological invention and my thoughts drifted to the unfortunate loss of such a grand inventor.

My reflexes and instincts took over while my mind was elsewhere, and by the time I'd awoken from my reverie the Kite had been eradicated. Judging by the pile of them around my feet and the blood upon my axe I guessed most of it had been my work, though Virgil and Vollinger had their share of kills as well. None of us wished to break the silence that followed and so I eventually continued onward

into the passageway behind the throne room.

Of all the lengthy hallways and damnable corridors in the entire mine, that particular passage seemed utterly interminable. It wound around and around upon itself, twisting in every direction and seeming to go nowhere. The walls were rough and crude, a far cry from the smoothly hewn stone passages I'd been traveling through. Something about those particular halls was very different, but they certainly hadn't been concealed.

I was glad that the scroll I'd used earlier still remained active, because that damnable hall was also riddled with traps. Everywhere I looked, every time I turned a corner, another trap would show itself to my unnatural sight. It seemed like there was only a single path that actually lead through the traps safely and I carefully lead Virgil and Vollinger through it. Finally, at the end of what seemed like an eternity, I came to a cramped room with a massive stone pillar at the center and a dirty dwarf with wide eyes squatting in front of it.

I carefully approached the crazed-looking dwarf while glancing over the pillar. It had writing scratched all over it carefully and meticulously, but still roughly. Before taking the time to read it I decided to announce my intentions to the dwarf in the room. He eyed me suspiciously and seemed like he was getting ready to attack, so the sooner I allayed his fears the better.

"Why have you come? I will not go. I spit on the judgment of the Wheel Clan. Elven pawns. It comes to this, it does. I am ashamed for myself and my kind, I say."

I don't know what the hell this dwarf is saying but I do know it's got to be important. At last, I've found what I came here for. "I don't understand. I'm only here to find the Black Mountain Clan."

The dwarf roared in anger, "Betrayal it was! Myself, the Clan of the Wheel, betrayers all! Sent to despair without hope for return! It was Stennar and the boy! ... Stennar... and Bates. We all paid the burden of shame."

Bates had spoken of betrayal as well, but he never spoke of one dwarf betraying another. "Just who are you?" I asked.

"Gudmund Ore-Bender of the Mountains Black, I am. Shamed

betrayers. But no! I did what must be done! I alone stood for the right! Yours is not to judge; mine is the harshest judgment of all." *Damn it all, would you please start making some sense?!* The dwarf obviously knew something, but it was nigh impossible to get him to say it clearly. "Where is your clan?"

The dwarf shook his head repeatedly, chanting "Gone. Gone to their despair. An island of death and hate, the unholy place of judgment."

Perhaps he means the isle of despair? Good heavens, I don't like where this is going. "I don't understand what you are trying to tell me." At least I sincerely hope I don't.

"Gaze upon the pillar of truth for your answers. Too long has my mind been consumed with my traps and those waiting for me to slip and show weakness. They are here, you know, waiting, hiding in the shadows."

If the damned traps are your fault and the assassins in the shadows are my fault I consider us even, dwarf. "So you have been down here 70 years, laying traps and waiting?" It was an absurd thought, but I knew that dwarves had legendary patience compared to humans.

The dwarf nearly completely broke down, "My traps keep me safe our homes must be protected to the end of days much evil afoot."

It barely made any damned sense at all, but I wasn't ready to give up yet. The dwarf had told me to read the stone, so read it I did.

"I am not proud as I set this down, but it must be known. I, Gudmund Ore-Bender, have rejected the judgment of the Wheel Clan. The banishment of the Black Mountain Clan to the Isle of Despair for crimes against the dwarven world—namely, the sharing of technology with the humans—is a more grave offense than that which it purports to avenge."

I commit to stone my judgment on Loghaire and his clan, blinded in their madness to the extent they would allow the elves to force their hand. The day the Elves came, led by the warrior betrayers of the Wheel, was the day my destiny was writ upon the stone. Gudmund Ore Bender would never be banished by the hand of an elf, no matter what untrue judgment of guilt were handed down.

The voice of reason, usually so clearly heard by the dwarven kind, was

shunned when it cried out to drive the human from our ancestral home. The Bates child sold the dwarven birthright to the world. As was he the charge of Stennar, so must be the guilt.

This day shall be remembered for all the days of the Ore Bender. When the proudest of clans may be forced as sheep into a circle of banishment created by lowly elves, while warriors stand and do naught, the Ore Bender must reject all that his dwarven bones will him to do, as there must be one to stay and make record of this, the most evil of days.

I scream for my brothers to fight the unfair judgment of the Clan of all Clans, I scream at them still.

I paused before turning to talk to the maddened dwarf again. His record had explained something to me at least. *Damnation! He did mean the Isle of Despair after all.* It seemed like this Loghaire of the Wheel Clan had passed a harsh sentence upon the whole of the Black Mountain Clan, and at the behest of elves for some strange reason. Bates would be surely wanting to know everything I had found, the very information he'd been seeking for years, even if it was not the kind of information he really wanted to hear. Before leaving, I wanted to get any more information I could out of the dwarf, even if it was mostly fruitless. "Gudmund, could you tell me what you know of this Loghaire?"

"Loghaire, leader of the Wheel Clan, cast the Clan of the Black Mountains out. The elves must have bedeviled him with their magicks. They attempt to control my mind even now. I can feel them in there."

Magick made me quite uncomfortable and yet still I'd never felt mages 'in' my head. I supposed that was the realm of crazy dwarves and steam engine enthusiasts alike. "Why would dwarves let elves interfere in their affairs?"

He roared again, dictating the rambling thoughts that passed through his maddened skull, "Elves cowered in fear at the might of dwarven machines for eons past, waiting for their chance to set the dwarves upon themselves with the threat of war."

Well, that answered nothing. "Then what of the Wheel Clan?"
"The Clan of the Wheel, the Clan of all Clans. Theirs is the final

judgment of all things dwarven, as they were the first."

Gudmund continued rambling on and on about his traps 'needing tending' and it was clear I wouldn't be getting anything more from him. Thankfully he'd had the sense to commit his tale to stone before the madness took him. "I will be leaving now." *For what it's worth, Gudmund... thanks.*

I didn't relish the thought of navigating backwards through Gudmund's maze of traps, so I dug the other scroll out of my pocket and unraveled it. *I really hope this one works, too. I never thought I'd regret all of my tinkering, and certainly not at the bottom of a dwarven mine, but here I am.* I chanted the words upon the scroll just like I had before, then closed my eyes as the scroll crumbled to dust and vanished.

I felt a draft on my exposed skin and opened my eyes to find myself at the entrance to the mines. *Oh thank the gods that it worked. Well, Bates, I lived... what do you and your investigators have to say about that?* I sighed, breathing in the fresh air, and looked over at my companions, "I suppose we'd better be off to see Bates, then." Virgil simply nodded his agreement while Vollinger checked to make sure he had enough bullets left over.

Chapter the Thirtieth: Human Sympathies Are Fickle Things

Bates' eyes went wide when I entered the room. "You have returned! Tell me, what news?"

I supposed that his utter shock excused him from the normal expectation of pleasantries, although the truth of the matter was that his wealth was all the excuse he needed. Instead of getting upset I merely smirked, smug in the satisfaction that I'd succeeded where his hired thugs had failed. *I'd better take care not to let it go to my head, but a little satisfaction is certainly all right.* "The dwarves were banished to the Isle of Despair because, uh..." I swallowed hard before continuing, unsure as to exactly how to phrase what I was about to say.

"For the sake of the gods, out with it, woman!"

There really wasn't a gentle way to say it, but if I had my choice I preferred to stay on Bates' good side. He wasn't the kind of man to taunt haphazardly, no matter how much effort it took to hold myself back from putting him in his place. "They irresponsibly allowed their technology to spread to humans."

He seems taken aback a moment as he considers what me have told him.

"By the gods, it is as I always feared! I doomed them all!"

He is now sobbing.

"What have I done? My youthful impertinence... I... here's some gold for your trouble."

He attempts to compose himself.

"Could you..."

He chokes back more tears.

"... do something further for me?"

Not even you can run... I never did have the highest opinion of Bates, though I supposed I should have felt sorrier for him. For all his wealth he still couldn't escape his past any more than I could escape

mine. "You would like me to go to the Isle of Despair?" Although the idea of it filled me with dread I had to admit I was quite curious about those dwarves. I'd survived the damned mines even with assassins after me, the Isle of Despair couldn't be that much worse.

Bates practically choked on his words, "If you would... I know I've already asked much of you, but an old man needs to put his mind at ease."

I sighed, becoming more interested in the blasted island by the minute. No matter how much I thought of it I couldn't imagine it would be any worse than the Black Mountain Clan mines. The island was just a penal colony, after all. Even the worst criminals in the world couldn't compare to Molocheans or rock golems. "Will your indebtedness run to more than 300 gold this time?" *Cheap bastard.*

He nodded unhesitantly. "Most certainly. I think this should cover any difficulties you incur along the way." He motioned to a nearby servant who presented me with a thick, cloth sack full of gold coins.

All right. You've convinced me. "Excellent. How do I get there?"

"Go to the docks at Ashbury; you can find it on your map. Ask around for Edward Teach, a crusty old salt. He is in command of one of the boats that I use for special jobs."

I raised an eyebrow at the mention of 'special' jobs. "And he will take me? Can this man be trusted?"

Bates crossed his arms firmly, looking down at me. "I trust him implicitly. There are rumors of a somewhat less than virtuous career on the high seas, but he's a good man should a difficult situation arise."

Right, a bloody pirate. However unorthodox, Bates' logic did make sense. I wasn't going to a grand ball, so an ex-pirate captain was bound to be more useful than if Bates had me traveling in a luxury boat. I'd had more than my fill of luxury travel, anyway. Cheap boats and dirty trains were it for me. "That is reassuring, Mr. Bates."

"I'll wire ahead to Teach to expect you."

He looks at his bodyguard.

"Chukka here would be quite beneficial to have around for

protection. If you're interested, you might be able to persuade him to accompany you on your journey."

Not so afraid of assassins anymore, are you? I glanced over at the ogre, considering the offer. Certainly this beast had proven himself to not be a mere decoration, but there was still something about him that made me uncomfortable. I decided it was better to let Bates keep his bodyguard. The man did no good to me dead, and powerful friends were a nice thing to have. "Thank you for your generosity. I will apprise you of my findings."

Bates thanked me, then sat down in a nearby chair and dismissed me with a hand. With nothing else left to do in town I headed directly for the train station. I ignored the hateful glare from the ticket seller and purchased my tickets as quickly as their damned overprotective questioning would allow.

The train ride seemed slightly longer than the train ride to Black Root, but at least the company was pleasant. Virgil spent the time carefully cleaning off the plate armor I'd given him and it made me glad to see he appreciated the gift. Vollinger, too, was cleaning off a gift though I'd never have been able to make it if it weren't for his expertise in firearms. I'd felt quite uncomfortable making it, but observing his care for it put me more at ease. *I treat them better than Bates would. They're here with me because they want to be.*

At last we arrived in Ashbury which looked like Black Root's twisted cousin. The layout was different, but it looked almost exactly like Black Root would if it had belonged to Tarant for another fifty or so years. The electric lights were the most obvious sign. Ashbury also had a variety of purple wisps known as Love Lights. They were a gorgeous sight to behold, but I didn't believe any of the myriad of superstitions that followed them.

He kicks the dog.

"Take that you damm dog!"

I was broken from my line of thoughts upon encountering a particularly foul gnome abusing a poor animal. The dog was just lying there helplessly while the man kicked it repeatedly. I ran up and grabbed the man by the arm, shoving him backward slightly. He glared at me with hatred and spat out, "Why have you interrupted

me?"

"Why are you kicking that dog?" I countered.

"This mangy mutt? You needn't concern yourself with him. A few more kicks and he'll not bother anyone ever again!"

You had better have a damned good reason for this. I'm not in a forgiving mood right now. "What did he do to deserve such treatment?" Even I was guilty of killing animals when it came to defending myself, I just couldn't believe that this poor dog that was lying there helplessly had attacked the gnome.

The gnome snarled, "The cur went right into my home and stole my dinner off the table! It's not the first time either! He's been skulking about for quite some time.... But I caught him this time!"

"That's no reason to kill him! He must have been hungry!" *Does this man have no shame? No sympathy?*

"Hungry? Why do I care if a ragged mutt is hungry? Any beast stupid enough to steal from me is going to pay."

"I would think you would feel some sort of pity for the creature." *The penalty for theft is hardly death. I would know.*

"If it were that hungry it would go hunt its dinner down outside of town. Not thief from me!" Thankfully, at my badgering, the gnome seemed to be ignoring the dog entirely and the dog was starting to shift around a little.

I played for time, hoping to allow the dog to escape since it didn't seem like I was going to convince this gnome to leave it alone.

"Perhaps it is lost and knows no better?"

The gnome raised an eyebrow at me, "Why are you wasting your breath babbling on about this worthless creature?"

Who are you to judge what has worth and what does not? How would you like it if I judged you worthless? "I don't want to see it hurt anymore..."

"Ha! Ha! You actually pity it? What a stupid female! I can't believe you actually care about such a mangy mutt. Oh wait..."

In a childish voice.

"I'm feeling sad... no body loves me... will you take care of me?"

Mocking laugh.

"Ha! Ha! Ha! What a sap!"

Now that bloody does it. I pulled my axe off of my back and gripped it tightly, "Perhaps I should show you how he feels..."

He held up his hands weakly, the blood draining from his face. "Uh... now... we don't have to resort to violence, right? Here. I'll give him to you. You seem to want the dog. Go ahead he's yours... I'll just be on my way..."

You're not getting off that easy. You should've thought about the need for resorting to violence before kicking this poor dog! "A little late for that, don't you think? Defend yourself!" The gnome let out a girlish scream as Vollinger cocked his gun. I swung my axe quickly, braining the bastard on the back of the head with the blunt side. He fell to the ground with a thud, instantly out cold.

I bent down to examine the dog when I smelled something foul. I glanced over at the gnome and immediately rolled him off to the side so I wouldn't end up standing in the puddle forming beneath his trousers. The dog licked me gently when I returned my attention to it and I carefully examined it to make sure there weren't any broken bones.

Healthwise he was fine, just starved and tired. I rubbed some fatigue restorer onto a piece of jerky I'd been carrying with me and I fed it to him. "There you go, boy. That ought to make you feel better." I stood up and looked at my companions. Vollinger didn't seem to care either way, but Virgil gave me a knowing smile. I took a stroll through town, but the dog seemed to want to follow me.

"What is it, boy? Do you still want some more jerky?" I tossed him another piece and he devoured it hungrily with a woof then continued following. I supposed it wouldn't do any harm to have him follow me for awhile so I thought nothing of it.

As I took my trip through the town a man stopped me. "Excuse me, madam, but you have the look of an adventurer about you. Might I

ask you a favor?"

Ugh. Adventurer? Surely you don't mean me... He continued staring at me. *I guess he does mean me.* I shrugged, "I'm listening."

"There is a rather eccentric scientist that lives here in town. Neither hide nor hair of him has been sighted in a fortnight."

I nodded, "What does this have to do with you?" *Or me for that matter?*

He seemed to sense my apprehension. "er... I had contracted this fellow to use his 'technology' to improve an old set of plate armor I had."

That sounded familiar. "Why do you need my assistance?"

"I went to his house two days ago searching for him. His door was unlocked, so I went in. I was immediately accosted by all manner of..."

"You expect me to go in there for you?" *If you think I'm wrestling with mechanical guardians for your sake...*

"It's too tough for me, but a woman of your ingenuity could waltz right into his house and get my armor for me." He grinned, thinking himself clever for trying to flatter me.

"What do I get out of this?" *Aside from the chance to pilfer any schematics or parts that catch my interest.*

"I'll give you 200 coins for retrieving my plate." *Ugh, do you honestly think that's a generous offer?*

"Where is this house located...?"

He seemed embarrassed, "Ah, so sorry, it's this house right here madam."

"I'll see what I can do." *And if I happen to find your plate I just might sell it back to you.*

I snuck into the house almost disappointed that it was, indeed, unlocked. No less than three oversized, mechanical spiders accosted

me shortly after I entered. I tried looking for an off switch to perhaps take them with me, but I didn't have a particularly good opportunity to find one. As soon as the first spider reached me it stretched several of its legs back and then snapped them forward with a force most humans could never muster.

It took me by surprise and struck me square in the leg. I nearly fell over from the impact and I was sure I would have a severe bruise if not a broken bone. I lashed out at it with the business end of my axe, chopping off several mechanical limbs in one strike. I hefted the axe once again and brought it crashing down on the robot's center, sending parts flying off in every direction. A small, red button labeled 'off' rolled up against my foot and stopped. I let out a distinct sigh and took to dismantling the remaining two spiders in a similar fashion. *At least I'll get some parts out of them.*

After raiding the desk and various drawers, chests, and containers for what few parts I could scavenge I climbed down a ladder hiding beneath a trap door in the corner. The basement was obviously more of a workshop than the house upstairs, housing complicated machinery and even a giant box that likely held a recently sold invention. As I wandered further into the basement the box very suddenly exploded outwards in a shower of splinters.

An automaton, shaped and sized like a human being, came charging at me with its mechanical arms swinging wildly. Frightened I dodged to the side of it and let loose upon its backside. I chopped at its legs, finding the metal used to create them significantly more solid than that which was used for the spiders. I struck at the casing of the engine inside of its chest cavity to no avail. Finally I brought my axe down in a vertical arc, and the creation stopped moving for just a moment, then completely collapsed.

With the way it fell apart beneath my assault I could only assume the construction of the device had been exceptionally shoddy. The materials were no doubt superb, but if it had been constructed well I would never have been able to inflict such damage on it. I decided against keeping the plate I was looking for. I had much more confidence in plate that I made with my own hands.

The plate wasn't difficult to find, either, once the automaton had been dispatched. It was sitting on a shelf nearby, collecting dust next to a schematic with instructions on how to build the automaton. I might've been interested in such a schematic if I hadn't already discovered firsthand how useless it was. I returned to the man waiting for me outside, carrying his oversized suit of mechanical plate.

"Excellent! Give it to me."

Now that's just bloody rude. "I've decided to keep it." I lied, mostly out of spite.

He looked upset, and hesitant. "Please give it to me? I'll give you 250 coins."

That was considerably more to my liking. Polite and with an offer of greater payment, almost as an apology. "You have yourself a deal." I handed him the plate, accepted his coins, and stalked off. After only a short stay in Ashbury I'd already been subjected to a poor dog being tortured in front of my eyes - a dog that still refused to leave my side, no less - and mechanical creations that seemed quite intent on snapping any limbs I allowed to get in their way. It was high time for a drink.

"See anything you like?"

"Give me two shots of whiskey and give them to me quick, my good man. The day has not been kind to me."

The bartender nodded understandingly, as they always do. It's practically their job to pretend to understand each and every drunk that walks through the door. Except for the ones lacking in coin, they didn't need to be understood. He placed the shots on the bar in front of me and I downed one immediately, staring at the other longingly. "What goes on around here, anyway?" I asked.

The bartender picked up the hint, "An old adventurer came through here last week. He said that he found some old ruins to the northwest, beyond the Grey Mountains. He said that in the ruins was an old altar made of solid gold!" I gave what he had said a bit of thought. I did remember that Kerlin's altar was supposedly north of the Grey Mountains, and it would make sense for it to be made of

gold. That's probably what the adventurer had been talking about.

"What about a bit more locally, sir? Passing the Grey Mountains is hardly a trivial matter."

"Rumor has it that old Malachi Rench's castle up north of Ashbury is haunted. I'm not surprised; that old Malachi fellow was a weird one, they say."

"A haunted castle, you say? Here, in Ashbury?" *Hmm. Even if it's just superstition that'll keep most folk away from there. I could probably fill my pockets with the content of that old castle and nobody would even care.*

"That's not all," he nodded, "I've heard that people have been seeing zombies around the graveyard. Zombies! I recommend you stay away."

"I'll drink to that." I downed the second shot of whiskey. *Zombies don't just rise up on their own, though. That might be worth investigating.* "Does anything happen in this town that doesn't relate to the deceased?"

"I heard an old adventurer passing through here the other day. I don't know what he found, but I heard him mention these coordinates." I quietly noted the location on my map. "All right, does anything happen around here that doesn't involve zombies or passing adventurers?"

The bartender shrugged politely, "Well, have you run into Kendrick Wales? He's running around telling everyone that he's writing a book, but won't tell anyone what it's about!"

I guess when you've got rumors of the walking dead all other rumors tend to pale in comparison. "You've been most kind, sir." I got up to head out of the bar and perhaps check into an inn room for some rest when I was stopped by a man near the door.

"Hey! You're that fellow who survived the blimp crash! I read about you in the Tarantian."

Oh no, I'm not making that mistake twice no matter how much whiskey I've partaken in. "I'm sorry... you must have mistaken me for someone else..."

The man looked offended. He practically shouted at me and I could smell the stench of ale on his breath. "No, I'm sure of it... and I don't bloody well like being lied to, miss. Not at all!"

I tried to be insistent, to play the part of the innocent woman being victimized by yet another drunk. "I told you, I'm not that person..." "Help! All of you! You can't hide from us, fool! We are the Molochian Hand! Die! Let me go! Please!"

His sudden shout caught me horribly off guard. Shaking off his drunkenness like a decorative mantle, he leapt over the table at me, picking up a sword and swinging it in my direction. I gasped, trying to dodge out of the way, but my reflexes weren't up to the challenge. Virgil tried to shove me out of the way, but he was too far... too slow. I closed my eyes and nervously waited for death to come, but it never did.

I heard a visceral tear followed by a wet, choking gasp and I opened my eyes to see what had happened. The dog I'd saved had leapt at the man with incredible speed and instantly torn his throat out. The man gasped his last breath and fell silent on the floor in a thick pool of his own blood, dead in seconds. The dog whined and nuzzled against my leg apologetically.

I bent down and pet him lightly on the head. My hand was shaking and my words came out stuttered, "G-good boy... good... goooood dog."

Chapter the Thirty First: When the Dead Do Not Stay As Such

I was more than a little shaken after the events in the bar, so I rented a room at the inn for the night. A good night's rest did a wonder for my temperament and by morning I was ready to go again. I decided to investigate the nearby graveyard before seeking out Captain Teach. Everything I'd heard about the place suggested I should stay away, so naturally I was drawn to it. My curiosity hadn't gotten me killed yet, but it never stopped trying.

There was a peculiar looking man standing next to the entry gate into the graveyard, peering inside excitedly. He was rubbing his chin, so deep in thought that he didn't even notice the four of us approaching. I thought he looked more than just a little bit foppish, but thoughts of Ristezze weren't quite enough to keep me from the graveyard.

"Enjoying the view?" I asked.

"Uh....yes?"

It wasn't exactly the response I was expecting. He was being intentionally curt, his voice a rather exceptionally poor mask for his annoyance with me. "Hello, sir. Might I ask your name?"

He crossed his arms and literally looked down at me. Nevermind masking his contempt, the bastard was almost proud of it. "My name is Geoffrey Tarrellond-Ashe. And who, might I ask, are you?"

"I am Samantha Colburn." Like clockwork, my thoughts again turned to old Merle. I was the worst tomboy of anybody at Merle's all-girls orphanage and she constantly scolded me for it. The dirtiest, least pleasant chores were always reserved for none other than me. I hated that woman right from the beginning, and time only made my hatred grow. "What are you doing out here anyway, Geoffrey?"

"I'm tending to my own business, that's what I'm doing!"

He rolls his eyes at me.

"I swear... the manners of the..."

The shred of truth in the insult only infuriates me all the more. "I'm sorry? Perhaps I didn't hear you correctly..." I tapped my foot impatiently, half of a mind to deck the bastard.

He stared me straight in the eye and spoke rather firmly and directly, "I think you heard me just fine, madam. Now unless you plan on becoming less of an annoyance, I suggest you leave. Really, I have little time for your insignificant drivel..."

If I were a lesser person I would've stabbed you before you could finish saying 'annoyance'. "Is that an eloquent way of saying you've no purpose here?"

He laughs heartily

"Perhaps you're not as ignorant and bland as you look, stranger. You've at least the brain power to convince an amusing response. Nicely done.... you've not the barbarian upbringing I expected."

Actually, my upbringing was the one true thing you did mention... I just pretend I've grown out of it when dealing with polite society. The more I thought about it, the more Geoffrey started seeming familiar to me in some fashion. "And what is YOUR background, Geoffrey?" Although I was wondering where I knew him from, I wasn't particularly interested in his background at all. I'd only asked because he was going to tell me anyway and I'd hoped that, by showing some sort of interest, he'd take more of a liking to me.

Naturally, he was only too happy to oblige. "Mine? Oh, the usual... raised in Caladon, schooled in Tarant, summers off the coast of Cattan. I'm of the Falsburg Tarrelond-Ashes, if you know that sort of thing. I spent a few years in Tulla, among the old wizards... bloody boring bunch of old codgers..."

Oh yes, I quite know 'that sort of thing', even if I'd rather not. There was no doubt in my mind any longer, I definitely knew this man, back when I was a child. He was a spineless twit back then and I could see that nothing much had changed since. 'Noble' was hardly ever an appropriate term. He was starting to catch on to my contempt so I masked it with feigned interest, "I see. Which college of magick did

you study?" I grew worried that he might've recognized my name, but he indicated nothing of the sort. Truly, I'd only recognized him when he mentioned his upbringing, and I was neither going to offer information about mine nor was he going to ask. I could count on that.

"Oh... I dabbled in the necromantic arts, mainly of the darker side... a little of this and that. I've a job waiting for me in Tarant with one of the newer mage consortiums if I've ever a mind to go."

Whenever the teasing would go too far and I'd get in a fight with the boys Geoffrey was always the first to run away crying. I'm not sure I ever even got around to hitting him, he'd run at the first sign I was angry. I might've thrown a rock at him once, but if it actually hit I'm sure his parents would've had me beaten. That's just the kind of people the Tarrellond-Ashes were. "Interesting." *Hardly*. "So just what are you doing HERE?"

"Haven't you heard? Ashbury has a problem with its cemetery. Seems that they've got bloody zombies just sprouting up from the ground every night, and nobody knows why. I just happened to be travelling through here on my way back to Caladon, and I thought I'd look into the matter."

Not out of the goodness of your heart, I'm sure. "What do you think the problem is...?"

He leaned in closer to me and whispered quietly. I shied away a little, partly out of distaste and partly because I didn't want him to suddenly recognize me. "Well, just between you and I, there's quite a famous individual buried here in the Ashbury graveyard. A fellow by the name of Malachi Rench who was quite a necromancer in his time... wrote a few controversial texts, that sort of thing..."

That name was familiar, too, though I'd heard it more recently: that was the owner of the supposedly haunted castle. Perhaps the rumors of its haunting weren't false after all. Then again, that just guaranteed the treasure to be found inside would be even more spectacular. I decidedly added the castle to my list of places to visit before leaving.

"But if he's dead...?"

"Yes, yes... I'm getting to that. I think the old chap was buried with something... something powerful. And whatever it is finally got out

and now it's coming back for dinner!"

I didn't really have any patience for the haughty bugger any longer. He reminded me exactly what it is I hate most about dealing with noblemen: they love hearing themselves talk. "And so?"

"And so...? And so I want whatever the hell is down there! And I plan on finding out, just as soon as I can figure out a way to get rid of these bloody zombies..."

There was one perk that almost made dealing with noblemen worthwhile, however. They're always afraid to get their hands dirty, and all too happy to spend good coin to ensure they don't have to.

"Perhaps I might be of assistance, Geoffrey."

"Yes..."

He looks me over.

"Yes, you just might be useful after all. I'd be willing to offer you gold pieces for whatever is raising these zombies..."

"Done. I'll return when I've found it." *I've fought zombies before. I can fight zombies.*

I pushed my way into the cemetery without any hesitation. Geoffrey looked on excitedly. I could practically hear him rubbing his greedy hands together. *At least I'm getting paid for helping the bastard.* It was still daytime so there didn't seem to be many zombies milling about around the outside. There were certainly a few, but zombies are stupid and short-sighted, so they were easily avoided. I found a trap door in the far corner of the mausoleum leading down to a crypt, or at least what used to be a crypt.

It seemed like almost nothing that had been originally buried actually stayed dead. It didn't matter much to me, however. I was growing used to the walking dead as much as they might've unnerved me back when my journey first began. They went down easily, or at least most of them did. Some of them took a couple good chops to go from undead to re-dead. I didn't waste any time, I needed to find whatever I was looking for and get out before the next wave of zombies rose up.

I snuck through a narrow passageway into a hidden room far back in the crypt. The stench of rotting meat was overpowering and the wails

of the damned issued forth with a renewed fervor. The dead that I found guarding that hidden chamber were a tough lot, mercilessly defending something. I was nearly surrounded by zombies at one point, but that was the very reason I never went anywhere alone. Virgil took out his own axe, a replica of Liam's axe that I'd made for him when we stopped back in Tarant, and he began vigilantly chopping his way towards me, thinking nothing of his own safety and only of mine. Vollinger took careful aim with his gun, making sure not to hit me, and the head of the zombie standing behind me suddenly exploded.

From off to the side another zombie latched onto my shoulder and took a great big bite, clamping down with supernatural strength. I growled and gritted my teeth, hammering it in the belly with the heft of my axe. It merely grunted, shaking off the blow. Face to face combat was certainly not my strength.

I heard another growl then and looked down to see my loyal new follower gnawing the zombie's ankles off with incredible tenacity. The zombie lost its grip on me and fell to the ground, now lacking feet with which to properly balance itself. I quickly salved over my wound to avoid a nasty infection while the dog tore into and fully through the fallen zombie's neck, decapitating it. *Bloody horrifying, but I'm beginning to like this chap, and he seems to like me as well. I think I'll call him Terry.*

When the zombies finally lay still on the ground I saw what I was looking for lying amidst the corpses: a tiny, white gem. I picked it up and tossed it in my purse, quickly heading in the direction of the exit. I approached Geoffrey with a sly grin, "Looks like I got what you couldn't, old boy. I've got it right in my purse here."

"Really?"

He seems a bit agitated by this.

"I'm VERY interested in obtaining that object. I'll pay you gold pieces for it."

"Hmmm." I pretended to mull it over, although I had absolutely no interest in keeping the gem for myself. If I was too eager he'd drop the price. "Sounds good. Here you go..." I tossed the gem to him. In return he hastily counted out a sack of coins and handed it to me.

With a hollow "thanks" he wandered off, staring at the gem intently. I didn't really know what he intended to do with the gem and I supposed I didn't much care. I walked straight away from the graveyard, lost in thought for a moment. I was trying to convince myself that it really didn't matter to me what he did with the gem, it wasn't my responsibility. *What does it matter, anyway? Anybody could've gotten it. At least it's not plaguing this town anymore. I did a good thing, didn't I?*

I was interrupted when a halfling I happened to be passing by greeted me. "Can I help you, ma'am?"

I was caught so off-guard that it took me a moment to formulate a response. I hadn't really expected to encounter anybody so far from town proper and I was only beginning to realize I'd wandered onto the halfling's farm. "Er... you see... do you have any work I might be able to do for you?" *Well, at least it's better than other things I could've said.*

He thought about it briefly, taking in the group I was travelling with and mentally assessing our capabilities. "I do got one small problem. I just can't seem to take care of it. Maybe you could?"

I shrugged, "Perhaps. What are the details?"

"I spend every day here: plowing, planting, picking... working the land I love. A while back, some wild pigs moved into the area! No matter what I do, they damage my crops. Those pigs are just too wily for me! Think you can get rid of a few pigs? I'll pay you."

Pigs? I've got zombie muck staining my shoes and you're asking me if I can slaughter a couple pigs? "Oh I'm sure I can handle it. What's the pay?"

He sighed, "It's not a big job. I don't think it's worth more than 50 coin. What d'ya say?"

I looked at him with a sideways glance, "I definitely think my time is worth 75 coins." *That was a rather gutsy thing to say... I wander onto his farm and nearly beg him for work, then I go and negotiate price?*

"You drive a tough bargain. 75 it is. Are we in agreement?"

Looks like I'm starting to learn how to talk to people after all. "Agreed. I'll return shortly."

The pigs weren't far from where I was when the halfling startled me out of my thoughts. I could see them in the distance, gorging themselves on half-grown crops before the farmer could harvest them. *Sorry, piggy, but the farmer and his family have to eat, too.* As I expected, zombies were quite a bit harder to kill than pigs.

I returned to the good farmer and he shook his head, "Glad it was you and not me, madam. Here's your coin."

"It was no trouble at all, sir. Do you have anything else I might be able to do for you?" Easy coin was hard to turn down.

"You certainly got an itching to work, eh lady? There is one other thing... see those huge boulders around my field? They make it hard to plow. Think yer strong enough to load them all into that wagon over yonder?"

Good god, Merle would have a heart attack if she saw me now. "I think I could manage that. What's the pay?"

He grumbled, "They been botherin' me for a long while. And I can tell you for sure that I'll never be able to lift them myself... How's 50 coin sound?"

Now now... you know better than to offer me 50 coin again for an even harder job. "50?! For moving those things?! I'll do it for 100, not a coin less!"

"Yeah. Okay. I see what you mean. I'm sure you're worth it. It's a deal."

I grinned, "I'll have them moved in no time!" I wandered out to the field, easily finding the first boulder. I stretched my arms and legs out carefully before attempting to lift it, glancing over at my companions curiously. They each tried to lift it in turn (excepting Terry, of course) and failed, glancing at me with disbelief. I handed my axe over to Virgil, bent my knees down at a sharp angle, and grabbed ahold of the massive boulder. It took every ounce of strength I had, but slowly the boulder did lift. I staggered my way over to the cart slowly and tossed it in. Vollinger wiped the sweat off his brow and

Terry gave me a congratulatory woof.

I continued my task repeatedly until it was done. I was nearly exhausted, but at least it didn't take terribly long. There were only about half a dozen boulders in all and most of them were fairly near to the cart. I dusted my hands off and approached the farmer again.

"All done, sir."

"Nice work. Here's the coin I promised. Thank you. I'd better get back to tending my crops. Goodbye."

"Thank you, sir. I'll be on my way as well." I accepted his coins happily and headed off back into Ashbury proper, 675 coins richer. *I suppose this adventuring thing is rather profitable after all, though it is quite a lot more work than theft.*

I stopped briefly at a nearby washroom to clean up a bit after dealing with zombies, pigs, and giant boulders, although when I stopped to think about it I wasn't really sure what purpose that was supposed to serve. It made me feel better, but I had every intention of getting my hands dirty again right away. My next stop was the old castle on the North end of town and I had a pretty good feeling that it wasn't going to be abandoned, even if nobody 'lived' there.

"Woof."

Sure enough, I was greeted by some rather angry skeletons the moment I set foot in the door. A couple of them charged in my direction, swinging bony fists at me ineffectually. I sidestepped their attacks and shattered their bodies in only a single strike from my axe. The other two remained further back, firing crude and rotted bows and arrows at me. My chapeau saved the day yet again and I didn't have a scratch on me when I finished bringing them down. Terry gave an appreciative woof.

Carving my way through the army of bone soldiers proved tiring, but not overly difficult. Haunted didn't even begin to describe the damned castle: infested was a much more appropriate term. I raided closets, desks, and old chests taking everything I could get my hands on. I especially took the things that made me itch... those would fetch a nice price at a magick shop.

After cleaning out the entire first floor I tended to the few wounds my companions had suffered from stray arrows and I picked open the

door to the basement. Locked doors always meant more goodies to follow, and I wasn't going to back down after the meager profit I'd made so far. The basement was eerily silent as I entered. Even my footsteps made no sound as the ground below turned from rough stone to upturned earth. It only made sense for a known necromancer to have a dirt basement.

As I crept through the narrow passageways I was continually assaulted by various skeletons and zombies that ran out from every corridor. *There's something here... they're protecting it.* Between the four of us present nothing much stood a chance at stopping us. Axes, bullets, and teeth were our weapons of choice and the armies of the damned that assaulted us fell easily under our assault. At last we came to a single room at the end of a maze of corridors.

A foul lich stood at the end of the room, commanding his army of fresh zombies to attack. *So here's where all the hapless adventurers end up, eh? What exactly are you hiding down here?* The battle that ensued was brutal. I rushed in past the zombies and sunk my axe into the lord of the damned. He was too quick for me, however, and dodged out of the way just in time. *You won't get rid of me that easy.* I swung again and again, even faster and more precisely. Within two strikes the creature fell into a heap of bones and dust with a hideous wail.

At the noise of their master's death the zombies turned and congregated around me. They surrounded me easily with a speed uncommon among their kind. *Age does make a difference, I suppose. That'll be useful if I ever want to become a necromancer.* Surrounded, there wasn't much I could do to dodge out of the way. The zombies tore into me mercilessly, their nails raking across my flesh and their teeth piercing it. The pain was intense but I gritted my teeth, refusing to shout out.

Virgil saw the danger I was in, but knew he was powerless to help against such strong zombies. Instead he put down his axe and began chanting a spell. A blue aura surrounded his entire body and then flew at me like a luminous ribbon. When it got within five feet of me, however, it began to waver and eventually it simply fizzled out of existence. *Damnation! Not now!*

Nevertheless, he refused to give up. It took everything he had, and I could see the toll it was taking on his body, but he tried again and again until at last his magick surrounded me and stitched my wounds together in an instant.

Vollinger's gun rang out rhythmically, interspersed with the sound of reloading after each shot. Every time I heard the bang of his gun another pocket of gore would explode out from a nearby zombie. It took several shots to bring down a single zombie, but Vollinger persisted.

Of course, Terry helped out as well. That dog was nothing less than a vicious engine of death when it came to protecting me. His teeth tore into the zombies and rended flesh from bone, oftentimes chewing straight through the bones themselves and crippling the zombies. He was such a threat, in fact, that the zombies began ignoring me and turned their attention onto him. He howled in pain as one of them kicked him firmly.

Oh no you bloody don't. Everybody was trying so hard to protect me, and if I had anything to say about it I was going to help out, too. I swung my axe in wide, powerful arcs and ripped zombie after zombie into two pieces. I separated their heads from their bodies, or in some brutal cases I split them straight through the torso. My arms were tired from lifting the boulders, but they surged with strength at that moment and at last each of the zombies had fallen. I took only a moment to catch my breath before rubbing some salve onto Terry's wounds. Virgil healed himself up and I passed a bit of salve over to Vollinger as well.

At last I turned my attention to my hard-earned treasure. The room was practically cluttered with piles of gold, no doubt taken off of the fresh dead that I'd just dispatched. Inside of a nearby chest I also found what could only have been Malachi Rench's personal treasury. I found coins and potent equipment of a magickal nature, strong enough that I had to give it to Virgil for carrying. Silently, I cursed myself. *Why do I keep dragging my friends into places like this?* I felt ashamed, but at the very least the treasure we'd found would more than cover the costs of repairs, and restocking on potions for Virgil.

"Both of you... thank you. I'm sorry I brought you down into this place. Thanks for sticking by me." I looked down as well, "Thanks to you, too, Terry." He whined and I pet him on the head, feeding him another bit of jerky.

Virgil took his helmet off briefly, "Thanks? What for? It's my duty to protect you and that's just what I'm going to do. Nevertheless, you're welcome."

Vollinger stared off down the hallway we entered from, "Don't you mind me, madam. I'm happy to stick by you. If nothing else, you're quite the interesting woman."

I sighed and pet Terry just awhile longer before walking out past Vollinger. "Let's get a move on, then. I believe we have an ex-pirate expecting us."

"Yes, this is bound to be interesting." Virgil replied.

On the way down the docks, towards the dingier of the two ships docked in the harbor, I spied a rather conspicuous barrel with a padlock hanging off one side. *Really, now.* I popped the lock off effortlessly and rummaged around inside. There were a couple bottles of wine at the front, but vagrants didn't tend to use padlocks. Digging further I found a couple healing potions and a book that looked rather interesting. I kept the book and gave the potions off to Virgil. *Who the hell locks a damned barrel? I wouldn't have even noticed if it weren't for that.*

I continued onto the ship nearby and addressed the man standing at the front. "Teach, I presume? I don't believe we've had the pleasure of meeting."

"I be Captain Edward Teach, salty sea dog and captain of the Gypsy Shadow... the fastest and most seaworthy vessel this side of the seas!"

Razor's Cape... the bane of Caladonian smugglers. They travel close to the shore to avoid detection, and half of them get massacred on the shallow rocks. "A pleasure to make yours, Captain. Mr. Bates told me you would take me to the Isle of Despair."

"Aye, I just received word from Mr. Bates to be expecting ye. Said

you'd be asking for passage to that hellish place, and that I should be taking ye..."

I wasn't familiar with the history between Teach and Bates, but I didn't need to be. Get two capable and unscrupulous men in the same room together and you don't have to think hard to imagine the plans they'll come up with. *"Special" jobs indeed, Mr. Bates.* "Thank you, Captain. Shall we leave at once?"

He tested the wind with his finger and winked at me, "Now be as good a time as any, lass. There be a strong easterly wind, and the waters are as glassy as I've seen 'em in a long time. I not be the superstitious type, but I'd be inclined to say it be a good omen..."

"I'm glad you think so, Captain Teach. Let's be off."

Chapter the Thirty Second:

Birds of a Feather

I stepped off onto the island and squinted my eyes against the blinding sun. I saw a rickety construction not too far down the beach: the paradise resort of the condemned. There was a man standing guard outside of it, but he didn't look like your average prison guard. His armor was tattered and dirty and he looked like he hadn't bathed in over a week - and smelled like he hadn't bathed in over two. I suppressed the urge to cover my nose when speaking to him, "I'm looking for the Black Mountain Clan. Can you help me?" "A dan? I don't know of any clans around here. You'd need to speak with Thorvald about that."

Of course you don't. I'm not so lucky that you'd just say 'oh sure, the Black Mountain Clan, they're the group of dwarves out back that came here about 80 years ago. Want me to fetch them for you? "Thorvald? Who's he?"

The man didn't seem to catch the tone of annoyance in my voice. "Thorvald is the leader of this enclave. He settles all disputes within its walls. But to get to see him you'll need to talk to Ogdin, his guard, first."

Why does Ogdin sound like a half ogre name? "Can I go inside then?" "Pass done for years. I am the overseer of the cargo."

Bloody hell, I do not like the sound of that. I do not like the sound of that at all. I clutched my axe closely and glanced at Virgil looking for some kind of assurance. He nodded at me comfortingly and Vollinger smiled, gently patting the stock of his rifle. I looked back at the guard, "Many thanks."

He held out a hand quickly as if he'd forgotten something, "Sorry,

madam, one more thing. I must warn you about wandering outside of the encampment here."

Not enough big, strong, lecherous criminals to protect little old me? "Why is that?"

He seemed genuinely worried and I felt a little bad for doubting him. I couldn't let down my guard, though, not in a place like this. "We've lost quite a few people to a sorcerous beast that defies our guns. I myself saw a man eaten alive by the beast when his gun misfired."

Perhaps my overconfidence was starting to get the better of me, but there was no doubt in my mind that I could slay the beast. Not only could I slay it, I could slay it easily. I didn't even think before opening my mouth again, "Where is this beast? I'll kill it for you, for a price." "We think it lives north of here. that is all we know, you will have to track it yourself to find it's lair. We have a powerful magical amulet we'll give you for killing it, but I can't tell you what Power it holds. It has never been identified."

What I couldn't use I could always sell, and the amulet would make a nice 'thank you' to Virgil for sticking by me for so long. "It is a deal, sir." I took off away from the gates to the complex, determined to track the beast down before it got dark out. Once I got to a small river I crossed it and turned North, following the water's edge. After traveling for only a few short minutes I spied a rather distinct set of tracks upon the ground.

I readied my axe and followed the tracks carefully, my eyes nervously darting back and forth. I hungrily searched for the beast, eager to prove that I wasn't a woman to be trifled with. The tracks continued on for quite a ways, but at their end I found the supposed killer. It looked like nothing more than an oversized ape, and it sounded like one, too.

While some might've been intimidated by the stories of it I didn't even flinch. *We'll see what they think of the woman that killed the 'sorcerous beast'!* I crept closely to it and I could feel my skin tingling as I approached. When I drew within a dozen feet of it the tingle became an itch and as I slipped behind it for a careful strike it felt as though my skin was burning.

I sunk my axe into its flesh, much to its surprise, and it screeched out in pain. I was in pain, too, but perhaps it was this same pain that allowed such a beast to kill so many in the first place. If only I could press my attack I would be a hero to the residents of the penal colony, and I needed to be their hero if I wanted to avoid the wrong kind of attention. My axe relentlessly carved into the creature's flesh again and again, never giving it even half of a chance to turn around or escape my fury. In short order the beast was felled, its enchanted blood fizzling off of my masterfully constructed axe. *Looks like my technology beat your magic, ape, but it was close - I will give you that.*

I trudged back to the penal colony entrance, walking up to the guard with a confident swagger. "I've dispatched the sorcerous beast for you." I dropped the beast's severed head on the ground, watching it slowly roll up to the guard's foot. He stared at it incredulously for several moments before remembering that I hadn't left yet.

"Spectacular. our small community thanks you. Here's a token of our appreciation."

I tossed the amulet over to Virgil for safekeeping, at least until we could get it identified. I gave the guard a curt "Goodbye" and pushed my way through the wooden gate. Blood still dripping off my axe, Virgil bedecked in full plate, Vollinger clutching his rifle on my right, Terry snarling down below: that is how I made my entrance into the penal colony.

At first several heads turned towards the 'new arrival', especially noting my particular gender. I could practically see the unclean thoughts. Then, as they slowly took in more and more details of my arrival, heads turned away to stare off into the distance or simply at the ground, no longer certain what to make of me. It looked like the effort I put into such an initial impression was well worth it. *Hands off, and that goes for all of you.*

If I was going to find the Black Mountain Clan I needed to find Thorvald and I wasn't going to make good on my impression by aimlessly wandering around and asking clueless questions, so I set off to explore the complex on my own. I boldly walked straight into the first shack I came across and looked the inhabitant straight in the eyes.

He was a tired looking old man, his hands callused from hard work. He didn't seem to care one way or another for my bold entrance. I tried to keep my voice friendly, but firm, "Hello, sir. Might I ask who you are?"

"I be called Norian out here on the Isle. Nothin' more, nothin' less." The way he looked at me didn't suggest any kind of significant emotion, likely a sign of how long he'd been on the damned island. He was neither afraid nor was he aroused. "Greetings." I replied. "What is it you do around here, Norian?" *At least you seem like one of the better sorts around here, though I'm sure you deserve to be here every bit as much as anybody else.*

He shrugged, sighing and turning back to the table behind him. "Try to keep to myself, mostly. When I'm not doing that, I brew a little potato moonshine. Potatoes are about the only thing that'll grow on this god-forsaken island...."

I nodded understandingly, "I see. Must be quite a demand for strong drink, out here..."

"You can say that again, lass. Not much else to take a man's mind off things. Makes me right popular around here as well... most of the men come here when they've got something to trade. Speaking of..." He looks me over, considering.

"I might have a job for you if you're looking for work..."

If the look in his eyes had been any different then I'd have had to make a veiled attempt at looking aggressive. The way he looked at and spoke to me, though, I didn't figure he was asking anything untoward. "What sort of work are you talking about, Norian?"

"It's not a difficult piece 'o work. I trade with an old man by the name a' Maximillian who lives out in the wilds, beyond the village wall. Old Max ain't a bad sort, but dangerous... you know what I mean? I've owed him a jug of moonshine for a fortnight, but with all of the men disappearin', I've been scared to go out and take it to him..."

Something tells me that isn't going to be a problem anymore. Nevertheless, I could stand to be owed a favor around here. "Perhaps I might be of assistance?"

"You're a braver soul than I if you're willing to face whatever's out

there. Old Max might not even be alive, but I don't want to make him mad if he is. If you take this jug out to him, I'll give you a jug of your own... you never know what some of old Norian's moonshine is worth..."

"I'll do so and return." I took the jug from Norian and slipped it inside of my purse. He didn't have the best business sense, offering me a jug to take the jug he'd just given me elsewhere. If I wanted to I could just take the jug and run off, and all I'd lose would be his good favor. Fortunately for him, all I was after in the first place was that good favor.

"Here's where old Maximillian was livin' the last time I saw him." Norian pointed to a spot on my map roughly near the middle of the island. "Tell Maximillian to give you a note confirming the delivery. You bring that back, and I'll give you a jug for yourself..."

"Fair enough, Norian. I'll see you when I return."

I stepped out of his shack and looked around, catching several cowardly men glancing in my direction before backing down under the baleful glare I sent back at them. I made a show of walking about the complex menacingly, sending a clear message that I wasn't afraid of those around me. It was little more than a huge lie, of course I was afraid, but if I let it show then I'd just be begging for them to try and take advantage of me. I shuddered thinking of what exactly that would entail. Reaching another shack on the other end of the complex, I barged inside.

The man inside was a lot younger than Norian and had streaks of black grease all over his hands and his face. He stared at me for several moments from across a table filled with broken parts and old junk. Finally he stood up and started swaggering in my direction. "The day be looking up, I think."

Virgil drew his axe and the distinct echo of a gun cocking echoed throughout the sparse room. "If you think I'm here for fun, think again," I replied coldly, "What's your name?" He stopped dead in his tracks, looking at me with a reconsidering glance before speaking. "The name is Jones... Jones the Collector they call me out here." "Hello, Jones. Why do they call you 'the Collector'?" *It had better be*

related to that table of junk and not to your first impression of me, you'd be all too easy to make an example of.

He sounded nervous and defensive, "Because that's what I do, girl! I collect things... all sorts of things, all shapes and sizes and tastes and colors. If its to be had on the Isle, old Jones has got it. Get me, girl? Ain't no one knows better about the gettin' of things than Jones the Collector..."

Fair enough. I can tell you're afraid, but still you've got an attitude. Let's not push each other, shall we? "I think I get the picture, Jones. Do you trade as well...?"

"Does an ogre's breath smell like yesterday's catch? Trade? Girl, I've been trading longer than you've been asking stupid questions."

Jones laughs, slapping his knee. The objects ring and clang as he moves.

"I'm just poking fun with you, girl. But yes, I know a fair bit about trade and trading."

Although I doubted he was as well stocked as my favorite junk man back in Tarant, it was always worth seeing about finding new parts.

"What sort of things have you been collecting lately?"

Jones seemed a lot more at ease after we'd exchanged a few words back and forth, and I felt a bit better as well. I supposed I couldn't blame him for his initial impression, and he seemed to understand my point of view as well. "Oh... just about everything that washed up on the shore... old forks, and rusted pipes, and the occasional shoe or boot. You lookin' for shoes? I got shoes you wouldn't believe! None of 'em match, but out here... wait..." I could see the change in expression wash over his face as a realization suddenly dawned on him. "You new around here, girl? Lookin' to earn some goods, make a trade...?"

"It's a possibility. What did you have in mind?" It seemed like everybody wanted a favor on the damned island, although that was to be expected. I was all ears: it could never hurt to be owed more favors in case things went sour, especially if they went sour with Thorvald.

"Well...I've been trying to get someone to go down to the Shade Beach for the last few months.... there's something REALLY strange down there, and, from what I've been told, PLENTY of things that a

man like me might be intrested in."

You've definitely got my interest, good sir. This is much more to my liking. It also sends me out of this godforsaken colony. "What do you mean by 'strange'? What's down there?"

"There's a few mage types around here, and they say that just gettin' within EARSHOT of the place screws up all their spells. Something down there that just don't agree with magick. Plus, old Deitrich brought me back a weapon from there the likes a' which I never seen. I'd go down myself, but they say it's crawlin' with beasts and what not..."

High technology, strange and unusual weapon, tough beasts... I'm in.

"Hmmm. Interesting. What are you offering if I go down there?"

He squints, thinking.

"I tell you what. You bring back some objects from the beach, and if you find something good, I'll trade you that weapon I told you about. God knows I can't make heads or tails of it."

"I'll do so and return..." I gestured towards him with my map.

"Here's where the beach is..." he pointed, "and good luck to you! I can't wait to see what you dig up!"

Excellent. He even has confidence in my abilities. Well met, Jones. "I will depart immediately. Goodbye."

The very idea of such technology had me quite thrilled and so I decided to put off searching for Thorvald a bit longer. Besides, if both Jones and Norian owed me some small favors I might be able to find Thorvald without barging into every man's house in the damn colony. If I did that enough it was bound to end in bloodshed at some point. I headed in the direction of the gate when I spied another woman, the first I'd seen since setting foot on the island. I couldn't imagine what the woman had endured living here and so I struck up a conversation with her. "Hello, miss. May I ask what someone such as yourself is doing here?"

"The men who envisioned this hell for those who refused to adapt to their society neglected to provide for the offspring of the convicted." Rage welled up inside me, along with sympathy. "This is scandalous! You've been here your whole life?"

She nodded sadly, "Yes. It was not a bad life, as it were, until my mother died last year. She kept the worst of it from me. Since her passing I have become abused and treated like common property."

I can't imagine the details... no... I can, but I don't want to. "Can't you speak with Thorvald about this?"

"Thorvald will not listen to my tale. He is only concerned with the affairs of... He is a dwarf, after all."

Rotten bastard. Still... dwarf, you say? I suppose that's why the guard directed me towards him. "Yours is a most distressing tale. What can be done about this?" *I will help you, even if I have to kill this Thorvald in the process.*

She looked around carefully, making sure nobody else was listening. Luckily everybody had their attention diverted from me still. She whispered quietly into my ear, "There is a tribe of nomadic women on this island who have cast off the shackles of oppression these men have tried to impose on them. If I could escape from here, I believe they would allow me to join with them."

I nodded understandingly, "What could I do to help? Do you need me to escort you to them? I don't think the men will stop me, though they're welcome to try."

"If you could speak with their leader... if you could speak with their leader, they might come."

"It would be my pleasure to help you." For once I actually meant it, and it truly might've been the first time in my life that was the case.

She seemed about to cry. "Oh, bless you! Show me your map." I did so and she pointed to a far corner of the island, "Here is the location of the tribe, as far as I know."

"How do you know all this information? Why have you not yet escaped if you know this much? I don't understand what could possess anybody to endure such treatment..."

She sighed, remembering, "My mother used to tell me tales of these women when I was younger. She told me to escape and live with

them if anything ever happened to her. Alas, I am not allowed to leave the encampment. I have tried before, but they always catch me. And then the punishment..." Tears started flowing out of her eyes and she rested her head upon my shoulder, gently sobbing.

"I am truly sorry. I will get you out of here as soon as possible. I promise you that." She silently nodded at me and began drying her tears so that the other men wouldn't notice. *The sick bastards probably take joy in making her suffer.* I turned and left the encampment. Looking at my map the home of Maximillian was almost directly on the way to the women's camp so I decided to make a quick delivery while I was out.

The island was deceptively large and arriving at Maximillian's house alone took nearly two days of travel through the wilderness. The sun was beginning to set as I arrived, but I gently knocked on the door to the shack anyway before letting myself in. The man inside was just standing up from reading a book, taking the spectacles off of his face. He was old, much moreso than I'd imagined when Norian told me about him. He held himself with a peculiar strength and dignity, weighing me with his eyes. "My name is Maximillian. Is there anything I can do for you, madam?"

To be perfectly honest, the man fascinated me. "I've brought you a jug of moonshine from Norian."

"You have? I see that Norian hadn't the backbone to deliver it himself?"

Maximillian laughs.

"Not that I can blame him... the wilds are no place to be risking your neck for a jug of potato wine. I appreciate it, stranger. I suppose he wants a receipt? Of course... here you go."

He hands me a note.

"Thank you. Might I ask you a few questions?" *I only hope this is one of those times when my curiosity does not actually get me into unwanted trouble.*

"Of course..." he nodded hesitantly.

"What are you doing out here?" Well, not one question in and the cat was already out of the bag. That was certainly one way to start.

"That's my business, madam. The Isle of Despair is no place to be asking a man about his past. I recommend you mind your own business."

I sighed. *If I'm going to continue being so nosy I really need to learn some patience.* "Every man has his secrets. Believe me, I understand..."

He seemed surprised, reappraising his initial impressions of me. His eyes wandered to my companions, and to the axe I carried. "You're right. Please, forgive my short-sightedness. No doubt you've things of value to share as well. Perhaps you and I might have something to speak of after all..."

I smiled warmly, taking a seat next to him and resting my axe unthreateningly against the wall. "I'd enjoy that. Tell me of yourself, Maximillian..."

"Perhaps now is a good time to tell stories. But forgive me if I'm a little leery of companionship. I've spent many years out here in the wilds by myself. Might I ask you to tell me of yourself before I begin?"

Even if this man is a Molochean I sincerely doubt he's heard of the order to kill me. Sharing can't honestly hurt... "Of course. It began not long ago... Goodness, it was actually over a year ago now. I'm the sole survivor of the IFS..." I chuckled lightly, "many apologies, you've not heard of the IFS Zephyr, I'm sure. It was a grand flying machine..."

I regaled him with tales of what had been going on in the world as of late, and where my place was in that world. I told him everything, sparing no details. He listened intently, hungry for knowledge of what went on elsewhere. He didn't even flinch when I mentioned all of the killing I was responsible for, or the theft, or the wanton destruction of property for meager sums. It occurred to me then that I truly belonged on that island, I was just lucky that nobody yet realized it.

He is silent for a long time.

"Then... it seems grave times have come to Arcanum. And somehow you've become entangled in her problems. You're a brave soul, madam. Few would do the things you've done..."

I swallowed hard. *Brave? You think I'm bloody brave? I'm nothing but a coward... I ran away... I left behind my home, I stole from the man that*

took care of me, and I even... I committed the worst sin a woman can ever commit. Then, instead of living with it and accepting my punishment, I ran... you think I deserve praise? I don't even deserve to live. "My reasons are my own. Make no judgments concerning them..."

Maximillian sighed, sensing that I was troubled. "We've all our reasons, I suppose. I'm not a man to judge one way or another. But I do know that, in the end, a person is the sum of his or her actions. You will be weighed in the same manner..."

I didn't particularly want to talk about how I would be weighed in the end. No matter what, nothing I did now would ever make up for the sins of my past. "Why don't you tell me your story, Maximillian...?"

"Yes... it is long past time that someone know my tale. Tell me, friend, do you know anything of the Kingdom of Cumbria? Her capital city of Dernholm? King Praetor the First?"

I nodded, listening intently. I'd been fascinated by the man from the moment I saw him, and if it made him feel better to tell his tale to somebody else then I wanted to be that somebody. It was his chance to unburden himself. "I've been to Dernholm, yes, and even done work for King Praetor himself." Maximillian continued his tale.

I see. The Cumbria I speak of was a much different place... far different than what it is today, I'm sure. I speak of a time when Cumbria was a powerful kingdom, when the elves and dwarves would come to her walls to pay tribute to her king. When the banners of the famed Dragon Knights were a thing to be respected and feared...

There's no doubt that Cumbria is but a shadow of her former glory now. The day came long ago when her fate was sealed. The day when technology began to rival magick, when the old ways began to fall to the new...

Cumbria resisted that change, and vehemently. My... the King at the time, Torren, was a wise and brave man, but set in his ways. He was cut from sterner stuff, but he was like stone... unwavering, but inflexible. He failed to see how Cumbria needed to grow, to change...

And so, he passed laws outlawing the use of technology in his lands, and

set a ruling council of mage advisors at his side. For years Cumbria was still very strong and influential, but it was only a matter of time...

Cumbria was surpassed, both in commerce and in power. When mighty Tarant demanded the release of certain disputed lands, Cumbria was taught a harsh lesson. The armies of Cumbria were slaughtered, the Dragon Knights cut down by gun and cannonfire. The glory of older days was lost...

King Torren... was killed. He led the final charge of the Dragon Knights, and was shot as any common soldier. Unwavering and brave to the end...

With the death of Torren came a power struggle. There were those who believed that Cumbria should embrace the new age, to seek a better way and make her powerful again...

...but others thought differently. Some people cannot see the answer, even when it is laid before them in the form of a dead King. Torren had two sons... the older son believed in the new ways, and the younger son believed in nothing. And so, the mage council that Torren had put in place put their influence behind the younger son...

The older son was heir to the throne by birthright, but men will create all manner of evil in pursuit of power. The mage council, who controlled the younger son, brought false allegations against the older son, charging him with treason. He was taken in the night, and sent away to rot in prison for the rest of his days...

"Yes, stranger. The older son was me. I was sent here by my own brother, King Praetor the First of Cumbria. And I've been here ever Since...."

"I... I don't know what to say. I've no words..." Looking at the man I could see the longing in his bones, I could see his desire to return to his homeland and right the wrongs of the last several dozen years. He'd had a regal bearing about him since I very first entered his run down old shack, and it was a shame how and why he'd ended up in a place like this.

Maximillian patted me on the shoulder gently. "No words are necessary, friend. You've done enough to sit here and listen to my story. I've made peace with my past... life here on this Isle is harsh,

but a man learns to live with himself, to accept what life brings."

I could sense the truth in his words, but also the misdirection. While Maximillian wasn't exactly lying, he didn't fully mean what he said either. "But it was so unfair... perhaps I could bring you home..."

"No. My time in Cumbria has passed. If my brother lives, I am sure he has paid the price due him. He was young and foolish... when one is a King, life is unforgiving when you live so..."

I refused to back down. There were simply some injustices that I could not bear. His was a wrong that could be righted, no matter how difficult. If I could undo the wrongs of my past I would do so in an instant, helping Maximillian do the same was something that anybody would do in the same position. "But Cumbria... perhaps the kingdom still needs you..." *Don't deny it, Maximillian. You know the truth in my words.*

He sighed, finally realizing that I saw through him. "I can still feel her, you know... the stone walls of Dernholm, the rolling hills and vales, the trumpet blast of the Dragon Knights marching to battle. I wake up sometimes, and I forget where I am..."

"Come back with me, Maximillian. It's not too late..." I urged.

He looks back again.

"Perhaps. I will ask you this, friend. The Captain of the Dragon Knights was a man named Warren Pel Dar. He was my one true friend. If he still lives and cares to do so, tell him I am here, and that I'd enjoy once more the pleasure of his company."

I lightly banged my hand against the table, frustrated. "I'm sorry, Maximillian. I already know of Warren Pel Dar... he... he is survived by his only daughter, Lianna. I need say no more."

I saw naught but sorrow in Maximillian's face then. He let out a deep breath before continuing. "So... my old friend is dead. He shall be missed. But this Lianna... his daughter, you say? Tell me... what is she like?"

I placed my hand upon Maximillian's reassuringly. "She is a warrior, like her father... her skill and martial prowess is renowned throughout what remains of Cumbria."

"I see."

He smiles.

"Perhaps Cumbria still has a beating heart. If you wish, go to Lianna Pel Dar and tell her I am here. Who knows what will come of such things?"

You see a hard look come over his face. A proud look.

"I will, Maximillian. I swear to you... I will do whatever I can to set right the wrongs of your past. Lianna will come for you, I promise."

He stood up and made his way over to the door, opening it for me. "I would greatly appreciate it, friend. For now, I would ask that you please leave me to think about this... and give me some time to mourn the passing of my old friend. Good luck to you, wherever your travels might take you..."

"Farewell, Maximillian. I may not see you again, but you will not spend the rest of your days alone here on this island. I swear it."



I left Maximillian's shack and glanced at my map in the dim light of the lantern hanging outside his door. It was late, but I didn't want Cynthia to suffer any longer than she already had. I struck off in the direction of the women's camp at once. *One good deed after another, I'm becoming a regular hero, aren't I? Hah. That'll be the day. Me, a hero.*

Chapter the Thirty Third: Everybody Has Something to Flee From

I arrived at the women's camp quite suddenly, not having been able to see it from particularly far away. If it hadn't been marked so clearly on my map I very likely never would've been able to find it, though surely that was the point. Although the several women gathered around the campfire glared hatefully at my companions, they didn't seem overly aggressive towards me.

"What brings you to our tribe, sister? Are you here to join with us?" I shook my head, "I'm here to help a poor woman who wishes to join with you." *Good god, they're practically naked. I really should've told Virgil and Vollinger to wait back at the encampment.*

The woman looked at me sternly and crossed her arms. When she spoke her voice was firm, but I sensed a hint of uncertainty behind it. "Why has she sent you? Why is she not here herself?"

I pleaded with the woman, the pity evident in my voice. "She is not able to escape from the southern encampment. They treat her like property, and... they abuse her." I looked down at the ground, remembering the expression on Cynthia's face as she begged me to help her.

"You were able to escape. We do not need those that cannot fend for themselves."

I didn't really 'escape'.... Do you honestly believe that fighting against armed guards is the same as surviving in the wild? "What message would you have me bring to her, then?"

The woman sighed, her eyes closed as she obviously recalled a distant memory. I could see her hands clenching reflexively into fists before

loosening again. She opened her eyes and stared at me, "Tell her it is better to die fighting than to live in captivity."

Damn you! She doesn't stand a chance! I stared back at her angrily, our disagreement evident in our eyes. I never would've guessed that I would be the one championing some unrealistic, righteous ideal... but somehow, that day had come. "I don't believe that is the answer she was looking for."

The woman looked away, unable to face the accusation in my eyes. "I feel for her, but out here feelings mean nothing. I can give you this old pistol to bring to her." She placed a disgusting, horribly rusted old pistol into my hands. I would be surprised if it could even fire a single shot without blowing up in the user's face. "Tell her to use it to escape, if she means to join up with us."

I gently tossed the pistol back at the woman and she caught it without breaking eye contact. "Charging the gates with that pistol would be suicide and you know it."

Any shred of sympathy that she'd had in that moment was lost. She would not back down, not even in the slightest. "Such is life. Is there anything else?"

"I suppose not," I growled, "Good day."



I didn't entirely know what to do then. I'd made an honest effort to help the woman and I was coming away from it empty handed. I felt like I'd failed her, and I didn't want to face her so soon. How could I tell her that she'd be better off just killing herself? Nobody deserved to be told that, no matter how true it was. Checking over my map, I decided to take a slight detour over to Shades Beach. I felt guilty for

prolonging her suffering, but at the same time I couldn't bear to shatter the one remaining hope she had.

The journey to the beach was only a day and a half away, perhaps two days at the longest. I arrived just before sundown, but I started feeling a bit unusual as early as noon. The feeling only grew the closer I drew to the beach. It wasn't a bad feeling, not by any means. It almost felt as though the air grew thinner, cleaner, and more breathable. I couldn't quite put my finger on it.

At last I came upon a massive wreckage. I simply stood there in awe for several moments, staring at the mechanical monstrosity. It had wires and gauges the likes of which I'd never seen before. The metal was a bit rusty but in otherwise spectacular shape considering just how atrociously wrecked the whole thing was. There were so many parts and pieces, many of them no longer attached, that I couldn't even identify half of them.

I was brought out of my stunned reverie when a disgustingly monstrous spider crept around the corner of the wreckage and charged at me. I dodged around it with the kind of agility possessed only by one accustomed to fighting. In a single, fluid motion I closed the distance between it and myself, positioned myself behind it, and cleaved it clear in two with a lone strike from my axe.

Killing it seemed to awaken many of its nearby friends and I was nearly swarmed by massive spiders. Vollinger's gun rang out and a nearby spider literally exploded, spindly little legs flying off in every direction. Virgil charged forth to help defend me and Terry darted past, mercilessly tearing a spider into pieces with his jaws. Together the four of us held fast against the wave of horrible creatures. I took special care in cleaning my axe off when the danger had passed.

Vollinger wandered around the wreckage of his own accord, picking up any little parts or objects that interested him. Virgil didn't seem entirely comfortable so I simply let him be. As for myself I scavenged absolutely everything that wasn't nailed down. I even managed to pick up a couple of schematics, but they were very worn and old. I couldn't make out all of the writing on them but I understood them for the most part and I knew I could follow them.

Of most interest was a schematic that I shared with Vollinger. It was obviously for a gun, though the description on the schematic itself was very unusual, "Bronwyck's..... powerful chassis..... Unparalleled design..... chemical properties of mithril..... violent reactions..... controlled destruction..... gunsmiths of Vendigroth....." *Vendigroth? VENDIGROTH? Legendary birthplace of technology? That's supposed to be just a fairy tale, like the Living One nonsense. Is this some kind of joke?*

I shrugged off the cryptic commentary on the schematic and simply noted the design for further development. It certainly looked like it would work if I could get my hands on all the parts. I'd already wasted too much time pondering it, however. I needed to get back to the encampment and rescue Cynthia. There was no way I could leave her there to suffer or die, it was too heartless. If I couldn't leave her, then my only other option was to save her myself. I had a feeling my decision would get me into loads of trouble, but if I played my cards right I would have a few allies in case things got rough. First I needed to deliver Norian his receipt.

The journey back to the encampment was a relatively long one, but I was growing quite accustomed to near endless travel. I passed not too far from Maximillian's shack, but I decided against visiting in on him. *Best to leave him alone with his thoughts. I swear, I will get him off this island.* It took me 5 straight days to reach the encampment and it was once again late when I arrived. I stopped by Norian's first thing and handed him the receipt.

"You made it! I'm glad to see it... I appreciate the help, friend. Here's your jug of moonshine."

He hands it to me.

"Good luck to you..."

I still felt that Norian's trust was awfully poorly placed, but I took the bottle of moonshine anyway. I had a plan. Next, I wandered back across the encampment over to Jones' place. He made an odd jingle as he rose up out of his chair to greet me. "Hey, Jones," I said casually, dropping what looked like some bizarre kind of pocket watch onto the table. "Think this'll do?"

"That looks like a good trade! Done! I'll take it, and you can have the weapon."

He hands it to me.

"It's been a pleasure working with you..."

I looked at the strange part he'd given me and suddenly it clicked. This was the same piece I'd seen on the schematic I picked up earlier. As it was it was no better than junk, but I made a habit out of turning junk into useful tools and gadgets. "It's been a pleasure working with you as well, Jones. Good day to you." I turned and was about to head out the door when I realized I was forgetting a vital part of my plan. I turned back around, "Say, Jones, how would you like a bottle of of Norian's moonshine?" I held up the bottle to show him.

"How would I like it? Why I'd like it every bit as much as I'd like a fine young..." His voice began to trail off and he looked off to the side of the room, unsure and embarrassed, making a light cough to cover up the silence. "I'd like it very much, madam."

Unperturbed, I set the jug on the table and slid it over to him. "Tell me where around here I can find Thorvald." I grinned at him knowingly.

He merely looked up, shocked. "Thorvald? That's it? You wanna know where Thorvald is? You just make a right when you head outta here and you can't miss it. Just look for the half ogre fella out front."

"Thanks again, old man." I snapped on my way out.

"Hey!" he called after me, "I ain't old yet!" His hoarse laugh chased me the rest of the way out of his shack and I could still hear the jingling of his trinkets all the way over by Cynthia. *We'll make our escape now, while it's still dark. Even in case of the worst I now know where Thorvald is and I can pay him a little visit.* "Good evening, Cynthia," I leaned in closely, "I've returned to help you escape."

She looked confused all of the sudden, glancing up at me hopefully. "Have you spoken with Loghaire? Are they not going to come rescue me themselves?"

I shook my head sadly, trying to explain their reasoning as best I could, "They want nothing to do with those who cannot help themselves." *I suppose that's about as kindly as I could've put it.*

She looked utterly crestfallen. With a deep sigh she steeled herself for what had to be done, "I suppose they are right. I should be able to extricate myself from my bonds if I'm to be welcomed amongst them."

I held out a hand to her, "No. Please, let me help you. It is a dangerous trek to their camp. You and I both know that you'll never make it out of here alive without my help, it's not right for them to expect you to fight against armed human guards just to prove you can survive in the wilderness. Please."

She still seemed unsure, glancing at me curiously. I surmised that she was trying to gauge whether I was really trustworthy or if I'd somehow been bribed by her captors. At last she deflated, "You would do that for me? I thank you, and humbly accept your offer of help."

I nodded affirmatively, "Follow me. I'll find some way to get you out of here." Without skipping a beat I marched off towards the gate. I tried to stroll through casually, hoping the darkness would conceal the additional member of my entourage.

"Madam, I suggest you tell that woman to stop following you, or I will be forced to attack you. She is not allowed to leave here, or even to fraternize with strangers."

Just my bloody luck. His words utterly enraged me, being so presumptuous as to dictate who Cynthia was even allowed to talk to. Despite that, I wanted to avoid killing the man if I could, but I was all too willing to do so if I had to. I tried reasoning with him. "Why is she not allowed to leave? I am a woman, and I can leave..."

The guard actually began to chuckle as though I'd just asked a horrendously stupid question. "She is the property of the camp. If you choose to stay here, you will become our property as well." He winked at me and grinned lecherously.

Like bloody hell I will! If you lay one finger on me I'll chop the damn thing off, and that's a promise! If reasoning wouldn't work, then deception was the next best thing. I spit on the guard's boot and growled at him angrily, "She is my property now, haven't you heard? I bought her from Thorvald. Stop detaining us, dog!" Although my anger was

genuine, I was only showing it to throw him off balance and better conceal my lie. It seemed to be working, as his face flushed bright red and he looked very suddenly worried.

"Ah, excuse me, madam. I didn't realize. Sorry for the trouble."

"Hmph. Good day." I motioned for my companions to exit first and I kept my gaze fixed on the guard until all of them were through. I was the last to exit, the guard still sheepishly mumbling apologies as I left. *Haha! That worked even better than I ever could've dreamed! ...and I got to spit at him, too!*

After we were out of sight of the encampment we sat down to rest for the evening. Cynthia finally spoke to me, the first thing she said since we'd left. "Thank you very much, madam... I... I don't even know what to say. That was quite impressive."

I was still a bit angry at the whole situation, and my anger showed through in my words. "Think nothing of it, dear girl. You heard the man, they'd have tried to treat me like property as well if I'd given the opportunity. Hmph. That'll be the day."

Virgil chuckled, "I'd almost like to see them try." I glared at him but he knew I didn't mean it.

Vollinger, for once, smiled. It was slight, but it was definitely a smile, "I must agree with Virgil here, I would love to see how you'd treat a man that would try and hold you in captivity."

I sighed, remembering my complicated history with Frederick. With a weak and sad voice I managed to say, "Perhaps... not as poorly as the two of you might think. Good night." I turned to lay down on the ground, letting my mind wander until at last I was granted the brief respite of sleep. In response there was only stunned silence, which I, at least, appreciated.

We set off again early in the morning and continued on that schedule for as long as Cynthia was with us. Despite my selfish attitude of the prior night we all got along well on that short leg of our journey, laughing and joking like best friends or perhaps even family. *Family? Would I really consider these people my family now?* In time we did eventually reach the women's camp.

The leader of the women, Lorria, glared at me as I neared her camp shortly after nightfall. I curtsied lightly, which was entirely a mocking gesture, "This is the woman I told you about. She wishes to join you." Lorria sighed and kicked at the ground lightly before looking up at me again, her eyes softened somehow.

"Thank you for helping, even though I am not sure it was in her best interest. As I said before, she will be dead if she cannot fend for herself out there."

"Is it not better to die fighting than to live in captivity?" I winked slyly. "So... will you let her join you, then?"

Lorria nodded towards me respectfully, "She may stay with us, yes."

She'll be one of you in no time... anything is better than being held captive in that awful place. "Thanks. Let me know if I can ever be of help." Lorria nodded again and turned back to the campfire, tending it thoughtfully.

Cynthia ran up behind me and hugged me quite genuinely. Tears were rolling down her cheeks, "Thank you! Thank you so much for bringing me here! I'll never forget your help, I promise!"

I pushed her away gently, embarrassed. "You're welcome. Just do what Lorria says. It'll be a harsh life out here, but... at the very least nobody will abuse you. Good luck."

She nodded happily, "I will! I promise, I will! I'll work hard!" *Even in the case of the worst it's better this way. It has to be. Nothing could be worse than the life you had before. Goodbye, Cynthia, and good luck.* I turned and walked away from camp, journeying a good hour back towards the main encampment before resting for the evening.

Even as I lay down for more sleep my thoughts still played out over my past and exactly what it meant to me. *I've tried so hard to run away, to become a different person... and yet, now I can only think that I've made a terrible mistake... one I never would've realized had I never run away to begin with.* I began to form a goal in my mind, a dream to work towards. I hoped that one day, perhaps when I'd finally managed to get the Molocheans off of my trail, I would return home.

I wanted to share the details of my adventure with Frederick, and make amends for the pain that I caused. I didn't sleep hardly at all that night.

Over the next few days of our journey Virgil and Vollinger tried their best to cheer me up. Although I insisted nothing was wrong, they both knew better. It was embarrassing to have them so concerned about me, but deep down it made me feel welcome in their company. It was thanks to them that I realized I really did have two lives now. I had abandoned my past life, and that was a grave sin for which I hoped to someday atone. To abandon my friends now, however, would be an equally atrocious act. We really were a family, and our home traveled with us wherever we went.

The sun was just setting again as we returned to the encampment. I was hoping to take care of the last bit of business I had remaining and get off of the damned island once and for all. By my best estimates I'd already been there for two weeks and that was two weeks too long. I headed straight for the building I now recognized as Thorvald's shack. Approaching the half ogre guard I asked, "Pardon, may I please speak with Thorvald?"

"Thorvald resides behind these doors. Only a select few are allowed an audience. It is my charge to filter out those undeserving of the honor."

Much to my surprise I could actually hold a conversation with the man. I'd always thought of half ogres as little more than beasts and their 'me like nice lady' did little to improve upon that perception. "No offense, but you seem very articulate for an ogre."

He dismissed my statement with a rather slightly smug smile, "No offense perceived. In actuality, I am but a half ogre. Never having had contact with either of my parents, I do not have any information as to the specific nature of my lineage."

Although I did want to get off of the island, a unique half ogre like this one was too interesting to pass up. "You never knew your parents?" It felt rude to ask him personal questions so blatantly, but my curiosity had always overridden my tact.

He furrowed his brow slightly as he tried to explain it to me, "No. I

have a vague recollection of the orphanage though, but something about the memory seems a bit peculiar. It is a most strange thing. As I remember it, all the other children were half ogres like myself."

"It is very rare that a human and an ogre would mate, and most of the time these couplings are the result of force. If there were significant numbers of rapes being committed by ogres, I believe the newspapers would have been overflowing with calls to eradicate ogres."

Now that he mentioned it there was something that seemed awfully unusual about the number of half ogres I'd been running into. "I have noticed that many city gnomes use half ogre servants." *Even if most of them are bloody useless decorations, it's still odd.*

The half ogre sighed. "Yes, that is very strange. I even worked for a gnome for a number of years."

He didn't seem to be nearly as bothered by that as I figured he should be. "Did you work for gnomes your whole life, before coming here?"

He explained the answers to all of my questions with a patience that even most humans could never muster. "No. From a very early age I remember working in a printers shop, from the early morning hours to well into the evening. I would then retire to the storage room where I was allowed to rest for a few hours. The next day I would be up before day break to start again. I've no way to gauge how long I spent in that miserable shop. Eventually I was 'rescued' by a well to do gnome who made a big show about paying the print master a sum of money for the 'inconvenience'. I now recognize this as the accepted way to buy and sell individuals. I worked for Mr. Chaplaine until I was sent here."

I frowned and reached up to pat the large man on the shoulder understandingly. He seemed rather embarrassed at the gesture. "Why was it that you were sent here, then? You don't seem a bad sort."

Although I could tell that his story made him slightly uncomfortable, he seemed to have come to terms with it well enough that it didn't really bother him. He even managed a warm smile for me as he continued to appease my endless curiosity. "Mr. Chaplaine did not wish to have a 'savage' serving his guests, so he hired a tutor for me.

Miriam was her name. I never knew that humans could be kind, or even what kindness was until I met her. She taught me for three years, until I began to ask too many questions.

"The more I questioned, the more agitated Mr. Chaplaine became. Early one morning the constable came to the house and escorted me away. I didn't even see Mr. Chaplaine. My fate did not become evident until I was on the ship coming here. People don't like their property to ask too many difficult questions. Being an influential gnome, it was a simple matter for him to have me shipped here. I believe I was perceived as a potential 'agitator of the workers'."

"That is a very sad story, but I thank you very much for sharing it with me." Something struck me as inherently wrong about that whole arrangement. It seemed to me that if a half ogre could be taught as well as this one then it wasn't right to treat the whole lot of them like Orcish slaves. Nevertheless, thinking about that wouldn't get me off of the island. "Would it be possible for me to see Thorvald now?" It was somewhat rude for me to so abruptly shift topics, and I hoped I didn't leave the half ogre with the wrong impression.

"I have a very specific rule I am pledged to follow. No one enters without first proving themselves on the field of battle, so to speak."

But I already killed the sorcerous beast. "The 'field of battle'?"

He sighed again, "The field of battle in this instance would be 'The Pit'. Barbaric, but effective in detouring the undesirable element." I glanced at him uncertainly and he explained further, "The island is sorely lacking in any kind of entertainment, so the men invented their own barbaric form, pit fighting."

I could hear the disdain in his voice as he explained it. For a half ogre he was really turning out to be quite the agreeable fellow. "It sounds as if you don't necessarily approve of the pit fights."

He shrugged as though he couldn't help any of it, "I don't mind them, they make my job easier. They're just not my particular brand of entertainment. I would rather pass the time with a good book."

I grinned at him, "You appreciate a good book, do you? I feel the

same way, dear fellow."

He stared at the ground longingly, "Sadly, yes."

"Sadly?" I was perplexed. "What is sad about appreciating a good book?"

"There are not many books on the island. What good is a love of books when there is none to be had?"

I pulled a book out of my purse, the very same one I'd found and then subsequently pilfered from the ridiculously locked barrel. "I found this book, 'The Hand', would you like it? I can get plenty of books back in Tarant." He accepted it somewhat hesitantly, stammering out his thanks. "Could you do me a favor in return?" I asked.

He cracked open the front cover of the book and glanced at it before looking back up at me. "Name it and it will be yours."

I smiled sweetly, "Could you let me in to speak with Thorvald?"

"You seem like a decent lady and I don't detect any subterfuge on your part. Thorvald will be cross with me, but go on!"

He hands me a key.

For once I felt as though my presence somewhere was actually doing some overall good. Of course I was on an island prison, so it would've been hard to make things worse. "You are most kind. Do you have a name for me to remember you by?"

He smiled at me again and nodded sheepishly, "So sorry... you may call me Ogdin."

Ah. I should've guessed. I did guess... sort of. "Well, you have a good day, Ogdin." I excused myself and hastily unlocked the door to the shack, wandering on inside. The dwarf I saw gave me a contemptuous look but I didn't let that put me off. "Good evening, Thorvald. The locals tell me you're the only dwarf on this island." "I've been the only dwarf here for the last 20 years. Sent here unjustly, I might add."

I scoffed at him, "Unjustly? Is that not what everyone here says?"

He puffed his chest out and stared up at me with a defiant, uncaring look. "I was just in the eyes of Alberich. That is all that matters to

me."

Perhaps when I get out of here I'll start writing a book of my own. 'Tales from the Isle of Despair', I think I'll call it. It'll be a collection of short stories about how people got on this godforsaken island. "What happened?"

He leaned against a nearby bed as he retold the tale. "I was defending the honor of my clan. The bloated, thick-headed gnomes and their laws had me shipped off to this rock. I was in a pub minding my own affairs when I overheard a gnomish merchant mouthing off about how the Wheel Clan was just a bunch of cheap, worthless ditch diggers. I confronted him and told him to apologize. He would not. Instead he let his liquor do his talkin' for him, so I let my fist do mine. It only took one solid hit and he was gone. Gone! Weak necked bastards. The next day I was shipped off to this rock."

Well, that's bloody wonderful. "Wheel Clan? So you're not of the Black Mountain Clan?"

"I'm Thorvald Two-Stones of the Wheel Clan. You're a bit off in your directions; the Black Mountain Clan is in the northernmost region of the Stone Wall Mountains."

Do you really think I don't know that? I nodded at him, explaining it slowly. "I have been there. Their mines are deserted."

He looked positively puzzled. "But... why is it you believe that they are here?"

I grinned at him smugly, knowing that he wasn't going to like what I said next. "They were to be banished here. By order of the Wheel Clan."

His face turned red and I could see the anger boiling beneath the surface. "Who told you this?!"

Easy, killer. I'm not insulting your clan's honor. "A feeble minded dwarf hidden deep in their mines. He said his name was Gudmund." As I said it the color drained from Thorvald's face.

"We were friends, but in no way was he feeble minded. He was one of

the bravest warriors I knew. I find it hard to imagine that he had become feeble-minded in such a short time."

"The story he told was very disturbing..." I told Thorvald of what I read on Gudmund's stone and of Gudmund's paranoid obsession with traps. I especially focused on the part about the banishment passed down by Loghaire of the Wheel Clan, in league with elves. He listened patiently and intently.

When I was finished he shook his head in disbelief. He didn't exactly think I was lying, but he didn't want to believe I wasn't. "The whole clan gone, my clan involving themselves with magicks? None of this makes sense! Have you spoken to the Wheel Clan about this?"

Oh of course, I consulted my handy map of Dwarven society and off I went. I sighed, "I would if I knew where I could find them. Do you?"

It was his turn to scoff at me. "Of course I do. Here, I'll mark it on your map." He did so. "But knowing its location will not be enough. To keep out outworlders, we created an optical illusion of the grandest scale using glass and mirrors. It makes the entrance of our mine look as if it never existed. Getting in requires a pair of specially made spectacles which use thin slices of Kathorn Crystal as lenses. Every member of the Wheel Clan has a pair. I still have mine."

"Then do I have a bargain for you," I winked. Thorvald looked awfully confused. "I'll get you off this island if you get me into the Wheel Clan."

He actually laughed at me then. "No... I don't believe you'll ever be leaving this island. Alive, anyways."

Is that a threat, dwarf? I thought we were being civil. "What makes you say that?"

"Did you think you could land a boat on this island without anyone knowing? I'm sure that he's already been captured, and your captain is on the way."

I pressed on. "Then come with me. With you by my side they will let us pass." *If they really did get old Teach then you're absolutely right and I won't be getting off this island unless I take you with me.*

He pondered it a bit and then began to protest, "It sounds tempting, but it is too risky. I am in a good position here and I don't want to jeopardize it. If the men discovered I had joined up with you and was planning on leaving them here to rot, it would mean both of our heads."

I mocked him, knowing the effect it would have, "Are you a Dwarf or a Gnome? Do you want off this rock or not?" *You heard me, Thorvald, and I know you heard me. Are you really going to back down from that?*

He gritted his teeth, then sighed. "Ok, let's go. I've been here too long already." Smiling, I turned and headed straight out the door. Many heads turned as they saw me walking out with Thorvald following along, but they turned away again as soon as he looked at them. The guards at the gate very briefly made as if to stop us before hastily changing their minds and opening the gates for us.

I walked down the beach the short ways towards the ship, hoping it would be all right. Although I really only cared about making it off the island at this point, it would be a shame if anything had happened to captain Teach. I caught the scent of blood in the air when I drew near to the ship and I grew worried.

Laying on the ground all around the base of the ship were the corpses of several convicts. At the top of the ramp I saw captain Teach staring down at the sand with a sword in one hand and a pistol in the other. *I am definitely glad I didn't take a fancy passenger ship.* Teach greeted me as I crested the top of the ramp, "Ahoy, lassie! What've ye found about the Black Mountain Clan?"

"Plenty..." I stammered, still a bit unnerved. "But what's happened here, captain? Who are these men?"

"You're just a fool for trying to escape this island."

I clapped him on the shoulder with a grin, "Nicely done, Cap'n. Let's get out of here." *Not a moment too soon. I owe you one, Teach.*

He laughed heartily, "I won't be sad to leave this place behind! Looks like we'll be heading back to Ashbury, then. Weigh anchor!"

Thorvald made idle chatter with me on the ship, "I still don't know if

I believe your story, but at the very least... thanks to you I'll be able to find out the truth for myself. If you hadn't snapped me out of my rut I'd still be rotting there on that island."

Perhaps literally, depending on how badly you wanted to keep those spectacles of yours. "No thanks is needed. I needed your spectacles, that's all there is to it. If I could meet up with the Wheel Clan without you I would've done so." I really only told him that because his gratitude made me feel guilty. I certainly wasn't helping him out of the goodness of my heart.

He only laughed, "I like you, miss. At least you're bloody honest." The two of us got along just fine.



It was still early in the day when we made port in Ashbury so we set out towards the Wheel Clan immediately. The journey overland alone would take at least two weeks and my curiosity was nearly killing me. *Just what really happened to the Black Mountain Clan? Even Thorvald admits this makes no sense.*

Only a few short days into our journey my skin very suddenly began to itch painfully, even moreso than when I had encountered the sorcerous beast on the island. Terry began barking fiercely at something and I looked up to see a translucent figure wearing a deep red, hooded robe. His voice had a strange echo to it despite being in the middle of vast plains. "Greetings, traveler. It seems to me that you're looking for answers. Perhaps it is time that I gave them to you..."

I nearly shouted at him, partially because of the pain I felt merely being in his presence. "What? Who are you? Answer me!"
"Don't you know? Are not you the reincarnation of Nasrudin? Has it

been so long that you don't recognize your old nemesis? Or perhaps you are not the Living One after all..... merely puppet playing his role....."

It can't be... that's just a legend, it's not real... I can't possibly be the reincarnation of a dead god, can I? "You must be Arronax..."

He laughed lightly, mocking me, "So... you remember me, do you Nasrudin? Do you remember what I did to your pathetic Elven Council? Do you remember when all of Arcanum shook before my power? Be warned... they will do so again. I have come to bring you a message.... Whether you are the Living One or not, whether the coward Nasrudin hides in your bones or still rots in his grave, the inevitable will still come to pass. I am returning. It has already been set in motion, and there's nothing you can do about it. I am returning, and all will fall before me. Everyone you know... everyone you love..."

I shouted, partially out of fear and partially out of the pain his very presence was causing me. Powerful magicks were really starting to have quite the ill effect on me. "You utter bastard! I didn't ask for this! I didn't ask for any of it! I have nothing to do with this! Leave us alone!" Arronax chuckled evilly and, without him even making a single motion, my companions fell to the ground. I could feel a surge of power flare outward from him.

"Do you see my power? Do you understand? Perhaps I need to be more clear. No one's safe, traveler. No one..."

It felt like my skin had been lit on fire. "Arronax...!" was all I could utter through the intense, burning pain. At last, I gave in and I, too, collapsed.

"Remember what I have Shown you here. Remember, and tell the the world. Arronax is returning to Arcanum....and nothing, nothing will ever be the same. Farewell....."

I was still conscious. I could hear him taunting me as he slowly faded away into nothingness. Slowly the pain I was feeling faded away as well and I managed to scrape together enough energy to stand up. I gave some packages of fatigue restorer to my companions and applied a bit to a piece of jerky for Terry before taking a dose for myself.

Thorvald looked utterly baffled, "By Alberich's beard, what the hell was that all about?!"

I muttered at him unhappily. "You needn't concern yourself, Thorvald. When we get to the Wheel Clan you can just walk away from it. You don't need to be involved. None of you do."

Virgil stood up and stared at me. "I don't care how many times you try to convince me otherwise, but I'm with you in this. When I first met you it was because of what Joachim told me, and because of my belief in the Panarii. That hasn't changed, but more than that I'm your friend. I wouldn't just desert you even if Joachim abandoned me and the whole Panarii religion turned out to be a hoax. Please, let me help you."

I sighed and placed my hand on Virgil's. "Thank you. It goes both ways, you know. You're my friend, too. That's why I don't want to involve you if I don't have to." I turned, facing Vollinger who was just sitting up. "What about you, Vollinger?"

He shrugged, "No matter how many times you say it, I too am here for my own reasons. Aside from that, traveling with you has been a pleasure. I wouldn't let a little thing like this stop me."

Terry let forth an ear-piercing bark and licked at my hand gently. "All right, all right... you're all welcome to stay with me, then."

Thorvald looked perturbed, "If it's all the same to you, miss, I'd like to take you up on that offer of dropping me off at the Wheel Clan. I don't need to be involved in this nonsense. Let's get moving, shall we?"

I nodded, "Yes, let's."

The rest of the journey to the Wheel Clan was comparatively uneventful. The whole lot of us were silent for a full two days, thinking about that horrible encounter. Even Terry didn't break the silence. When we arrived at the mountainside, Thorvald pointed out a circle made of stone in the ground and handed me the spectacles. I stood in the center of the stone and put the spectacles on, then

gasped. "That's amazing! I see an entrance, but I swear it wasn't there a moment ago!"

He grinned, "Didn't I tell you, woman? I'm going in... I'm home!"

I ran inside hurriedly, more excited than I'd been ever since I was a young child. The Black Mountain Clan mines had been dirty and abandoned, but the Wheel Clan yet remained and their mountain home was quite possibly the most grand structure I ever had the pleasure of laying my eyes on.

As I reached the end of the entryway which opened up into a grand chamber beyond I was stopped by a dwarven guard. "Hold! What business have you in the caverns of the Wheel Clan? Speak!"

I did my best to make my presence sound urgent in the face of my childlike entrance, "I come with grave news, I'm afraid. I've been to the Black Mountain Clan mines, but as you may know the Black Mountain Clan was banished to the Isle of Despair by order of Loghaire of the Wheel Clan. I traveled to the Isle of Despair to look for them, and I met up with Thorvald Two-Stones who had been there for 200 years. Even he hadn't seen nor heard from the Black Mountain Clan. I come here now to speak with Loghaire directly about this matter."

"I see. This is grave news indeed. You need to speak with King Thunder-Stone. His house is directly northeast of here, just through the center passage. Speak with him, and he will know what to do..."

"Thank you... I'll do that." I made as if to rush forward, but Thorvald stopped me.

"Well, my friend... I thank you for saving me, and wish you luck on your quest. I'm off to catch up with some friends of mine..."

I shook his hand and gave him a warm smile, which wasn't entirely false, "The pleasure was mine, Thorvald. I bear you no ill will for deciding not to continue on with me... good day to you."

To be honest, I envy you. If I had the option I would abandon this silly quest as well. Whether I do or not, though, that isn't going to stop Arronax from hunting me down. At the very least I get to spend my time on the road with excellent friends. Goodbye, Thorvald.

Chapter the Thirty Fourth: A Grim Process of Manufacture

I was so entranced by the stunning grandeur of the cavern that I couldn't help but wander off. It seemed like an awful silly thing to do, given more pressing matters, but the Black Mountain clan had already been gone for dozens of years. Getting a little sidetracked wouldn't make any difference.

I first explored down a nearby stairway straight North of the entrance, and what I found was fantastic. Instead of abandoned mines, malevolent piles of rock, and rabid wildlife I discovered an entire town of dwarves. It did make sense, considering this was their home, but my memories of the Black Mountain Clan were not so easily forgotten. There were grand hallways and rooms carved out of sheer rock. The walls were so smooth that if they hadn't also been uneven I would've attributed their creation to a machine. These tunnels were not made by men, however, but dwarves... and the dwarves had a patience and penchant for hard work that no man ever could.

I seemed to have stumbled into a room in my slack-jawed awe of the place and I was interrupted by a rather amused looking dwarf. "Can I help you, human?" I could hear the mirth with which he spoke and I had to be somewhat amused as well. *By the Gods, I'm acting like Jayna.*

"So sorry to intrude," I giggled and the dwarf in front of me smiled in return. "Who might you be, sir dwarf?"

The dwarf before me is old, with large streaks of gray in his hair and beard. He is wide even for a dwarf, with large hands and forearms.

"My name is Vegard. Vegard Moltenflow. Nice to make your acquaintance, girl."

"Hello, Vegard. I am Samantha Colburn." *Sammy, Sammy, son of...*

Merle hated me something fierce. She thought she was going to have the damndest time marrying me off to some sod. I didn't care, I never had any intention of getting married off. What kind of a life is that for a woman to lead in such a modern age? "So, what is it you do here, Vegard?"

He seemed surprised at my interest. I supposed most humans didn't care one way or another about dwarven culture. "Me? I'm just an old dwarf, trying to stay out of everyone's way. Used to be a miner, way back when the Dredge was operational..."

Why do I get the feeling you're going to tell me about some awful pit of hell in such a way as to pique my curiosity so that I go tromping about in it just to see if it's really as bad as you say it is? "I'm almost afraid to ask. What's the Dredge?"

"The Dredge? It's a system of caverns that used to be an iron mine. The entrance isn't far from here... just next to the royal palace. I can see those gears a-turnin' in that head of yours, but there's no more iron in those caves, girl. I took a fair amount out, myself. The only thing left in the Dredge is dark and monsters. Not a place you want to be takin' a stroll in. It's a shame, too... I lost something down there a long time ago, but no one goes in there anymore. Orders of the King, and all that."

I swallowed hard. *I'd best not ask him any more. I'm too curious for my own good and asking about it will just make me want to investigate all the more. I don't have to be involved. He said I don't want to go down there and he means it. There's even an order from the King. This cave is bad. It's really, really bad.* "What did you lose down there?" *Son of a bitch.* "Long ago, I lost a key that opens the door to a secret room deep within the caverns of the Dredge, a room carved out with my own hands. In that room is an old family heirloom, and I'd love to see it again before I die. I used to go looking for the key, but once they closed the Dredge, I could no longer do so."

If he can't do it, I certainly can't. I'd be have to be daft to even consider it. It would be foolish to risk my life in such a dangerous place just for some dwarf's heirloom. "Perhaps I might retrieve that heirloom?" *Why will my mouth not stay shut? All right... this is none of my business. Just*

because the caves probably haven't been explored for over a dozen years and my eyes might be the first to... no! There are beasts! Beasts the likes of which I've never seen and may never get the chance to... damn it, no!

Vegard looked at me strangely, as though he could hear the intense battle raging on in the depths of my skull. "Hmmm. I don't know... there are always guards at the entrance to the Dredge, and I wouldn't want you to cause any trouble. BUT! If you happen to get permission to go into those old caves and came out with my heirloom, I might be willing to give you a stout dwarven miner's helmet... it's good for seeing in the dark."

Well, I can't even get in there anyway. No sense thinking about it, it's not like me to sneak past a few well-meaning guards trying to keep me out of a dangerous place for my own good. "Done. I'll return with it shortly." I am a damned idiot. If ever there is a time that my curiosity actually results in my death, this is that time. I would've liked to spend more time chasing after the Black Mountain Clan, but ending up in the belly of a horrible beast infesting an abandoned dwarven mine isn't such a bad way to go. At least I'll get a good look at the beast firsthand.

I sighed, resigned to my fate. I was getting pretty good with my axe, and I'd not forgotten Mr. Ogg's lessons on dodging either. My armor would probably take a few cuts and scratches, but certainly I'd be able to fix it up in no time. Even if I couldn't, I was surrounded by bloody dwarves. If a dwarf couldn't repair it then nobody could.

However, if I were to truly brave a mine where even dwarves would not venture I would need to be prepared. The same sense of curiosity that had gotten me interested in the Dredge in the first place also helped me to decide that the best way to gather supplies was to just wander around aimlessly until I'd found everything I needed. It may not have been efficient, but damn was it ever satisfying. I left Vegard's humble room and wandered right into the nearest other room, not letting silly things like closed doors stand in my way. Unsurprisingly, I encountered another dwarf. "Greetings, sir. And who might you be?"

He looked up at me, slightly bothered. It seemed as though I was interrupting him. "My name is Erick Obsidian... it's a pleasure to meet

you." I was impressed at how polite he was, considering I'd just barged in without so much as a knock.

"Well met, Erick. Might I ask what it is that you do here?" It was oddly liberating to just follow my curiosity along, utterly disregarding all sense of decency or tact. If I wanted to barge into a door unannounced, I did just that. If I felt like pestering the dwarf behind that door with inane questions until he threw me out, then I'd know firsthand the limits of dwarven patience.

"Me? I'm a historian... I study our dwarven past, reflect on the paths we have taken, collect objects of historical significance and value." You almost see him smile.

"When I can, I try to tell our story and tell it true... I can only hope to be a looking glass into the dwarven soul..."

We're going to get along well, you and I. "What are you studying right now, Erick?" It looked like I'd managed to find the perfect dwarf out from among a whole cavern of them. If anybody wouldn't mind lecturing me on dwarves it would be good old Erick. I supposed I could always go ask Magnus, but Magnus didn't count. Not by a longshot.

Erick seemed like he was going to start explaining something, but got sidetracked, "Well... I've many suppliers. We trade often in Stillwater when the need arises. But, just lately, I've run out of mithril. If you know anything about the metal, you know that it's rare. I'm having trouble finding a new source, and many of my objects are incomplete without it."

I wasn't exactly asking you about your trade difficulties. "What, Erick? What is it you found...?"

He shook his head as if clearing it of some unseen haze. "Sorry about that... the possibilities are so exciting... perhaps I should be more forthcoming. Dwarven mythology tells of an ancient race of dwarves, whose civilization was filled with such wonders as the world has never known before or since. They were known as the Iron Clan... No one really knows if they were real, or what happened to them if they were, because we've found no proof of their existence. BUT! One of our miners dug up an old dwarven mace a few weeks ago... the

handle of that axe was hollow, and within it was this..."

I looked over the schematic carefully, drawing out certain portions of the final product in my mind. "Oh my goodness! I think I might know what this could be used for! Erick, please, can I have this?" I couldn't be certain until I actually constructed the object and felt it with my own hands, but the shape certainly matched something that had been nagging at the back of my mind for some time.

He nodded, "Yes... I suppose it does no harm. I've a copy of the schematic, so if you cannot find the 'Place of Iron', I could always go looking myself. And if you do find it, and the Durin Stone is there, bring it to me... it would be worthless to anyone but a dwarf, and most precious to me. I'd have nothing to offer but my thanks... I'm afraid a historian has little in worldly goods..."

You clearly underestimate my curiosity. Ancient mysteries are exactly my cup of tea. "I'd be honored to go on this journey, pay or no pay." While really would be nice to get paid, I wasn't honestly going to turn him down just out of greed. My curiosity was far greater than my greed ever had been, and that was saying a lot.

Erick smiled at me, obviously pleased to have somebody else that shared his interest. "Splendid... Here, take the schematic. I wish you the best of luck."

Thank you, Erick. If I survive that awful place you call the Dredge I'll be sure to hunt down the materials for this schematic. When that happens, I'm fairly certain I know what to do. Never one to come right out and say what's on my mind, I merely muttered a "Thank you. I must be going now." I wandered out into the hallway and of all the people to see wandering past I caught a glimpse of Thorvald disappearing around the corner. Behind him I saw a door hanging open just a little bit.

I wandered over to it and peeked my head in. The dwarf I saw inside stood up from the table he was sitting at, laughing a bit and calling out, "Back again so soon? Did you forget-?" He had finally looked over towards whom he was actually speaking. "Can I help you, human?"

I opened the door the rest of the way and sheepishly walked inside.
"What is your name, sir?"

He sighed, as if he cared little for dealing with me. "I go by the name of Thrayne Iron Heart. And you are?" *Hmm. Now that I think of it, none of these dwarves are anywhere near as uptight as old Magnus was. They've all been very patient and forthcoming with me. Virgil was spot on with his 'city dwarf' comment.*

"I'm Samantha Colburn." *...doesn't know that she's a girl.* Merle eventually figured me out, much to my regret. She'd been keeping a close eye on my belongings and badgering me about where I was getting all of them. I showed her the receipts and she just asked me where I got the money. One day she read a story in the paper about a rash of burglaries in the area and she put two and two together. She finally approached me and demanded a cut for her silence. She was such a hag.

"Yes, I have heard your name. You're the traveler that brought Thorvald back. We owe you a debt of gratitude, I am sure you are aware."

It must be nice to be a member of such a tightly-knit clan. I'm beginning to see what had so enraptured Bates in his youth. Thorvald had mentioned he'd been gone for 200 years, yet the Wheel Clan still remembered him and were grateful for his return. I was actually jealous. "That being the case, may I ask you some questions?" Thrayne merely nodded. "Many thanks. What could you tell me of the Wheel Clan?"

He sighed, taking a seat. It was obvious that he didn't care to put up with a long line of questioning, but he wasn't going to tell me off either. "The Wheel Clan is the first and the greatest of all, hence our position as the Head of Clans. We have ruled unchallenged since the great Clan Wars."

The term sounded familiar to me, as though I'd heard mention of it before but never had it quite explained to me. "Pardon. The Clan Wars?"

Thrayne shook his head, "Yes, perhaps I've said too much. The great

wars are not something we discuss with outsiders."

I bit my lip lightly, wanting to press on but not wanting to offend the man, restraint finally beginning to take hold. He was at least being rather polite. "Very well. If the Wheel Clan is the leader of all clans, why is it so secluded?"

"Ever since..."

He begins to say something and obviously thinks better of it.

"We keep to ourselves ever since your race stole our technology. Mere children with the power of our gods in their hands! The thought of it makes my blood turn cold, it does. Never in all our history could we have ever imagined such a thing. Since our place in the world has been stolen, we have removed ourselves from it."

I almost felt offended. Although I was certainly no Gilbert Bates, I did enjoy tinkering with things. I wasn't sure that he quite understood the complexities of being a human technologist. There was the urge, the drive, and the curiosity... the desire to create new and useful things to help not only yourself but also others around you. It was foolish to think dwarves felt any differently, of course. Perhaps Bates and I had a bit of dwarven blood flowing in our veins after all.

It was hard to blame Thrayne for his attitude, really. I certainly couldn't deny the consequences of what Bates had done, although the consequences were not his to bear alone. The gunner is far more to blame for a murder than the gunsmith. It wasn't an easy situation to be sure. "I admit my kind have made mistakes, but you're being a bit harsh." *Blame not the inventor, but the greedy businessman that uses the inventor's creations for profit no matter what the consequences.*

Thrayne looked me in the eye, saw the uncertainty that I grappled with in trying to justify my own curiosity, my own desire to continue tinkering. "You are entitled to your opinions, human, even though they may be wrong. I do not blame you personally - as a matter of fact, I have met many fine humans. But as a race, you lack maturity."

I sighed sadly, "I suppose I can't argue with that." I really meant it, too. I absolutely agreed with him that the race of humanity was immature, and even perhaps would've been better off without the steam engine. Reflecting solely upon my own journey, I thought of the things I experienced and learned merely by having to travel

under my own power, often going to places that were not visited by a railroad. If I thought about it I was sure I could come up with more good things that would come from avoiding the use of technology. "On another subject, Thrayne, I've been curious about something for quite some time now. If you don't mind my asking, where are all the dwarven women?"

He seems to become very angry for a moment, and then he calms himself down.

"That is not something you should ever ask a dwarf about! You are fortunate I am a forgiving person; some would hew you down where you stand for even mentioning such a thing."

Now you're starting to sound like Magnus. Ugh. While the blatant abuse of technology seemed to be a uniquely human trait, getting offended at polite questions seemed to be a uniquely dwarven trait. "I apologize for asking, Thrayne. I suppose I'll be going now."

"Wait," he called, "I have one thing to ask you. I know that you're a traveler - if you ever happen to find yourself at the Stonecutter Clan, could you deliver a message to my brother? He's been gone some fifteen years and I need his help back here. He's a bit of a layabout, if you get my meaning."

I sighed, debating whether or not I should really accept his offer. "I suppose I could do that for you." *Exploring another clan's home should be interesting, anyway. I doubt most humans even see one, let alone three!* "Could you mark the location on my map?" I pulled my map out of my purse and showed it to him. He glanced it over for just a moment, then made a single mark on it. "Thanks. I'll return when I've found him." I politely excused myself and walked back out into the hallway.

"Excuse me, Samantha." Virgil interrupted me as I continued to explore. "Could I speak with you for a moment?"

I smiled at him, "Of course, Virgil. What is it you'd like to talk about?"

"Well..." he seemed nervous, "We've been on the road for quite some time. Ashbury was a long ways away and that was the last real town we were in. I know that things are fine for you and for Vollinger, but

I'm starting to run low on supplies. Before we go exploring any of the dark caves you've agreed to search, do you think we could make a trip back to Tarant so I could restock?"

I guess I hadn't thought of that. My salves don't work any better on him than his magic does on me... and dwarves don't exactly keep a wide stock of potions. "That's a reasonable request, Virgil."



"Take a look at this map. If we were to go to the Stonecutter Clan like Thrayne just asked us to, we'd already be travelling halfway to Tarant. What say we quick make this stop of yours and then we'll head over to find Thrayne's brother?"

He smiled, becoming less nervous by the second. "I'd appreciate that. I'm sorry to be a bother."

"It's not a bother, Virgil," I insisted, "We've got plenty of time to figure things out. It wouldn't be an adventure if we didn't go way the hell out of our way now and then, would it?"

Vollinger started chuckling. "You sure do keep a positive attitude for a woman with assassins on her trail."

I shrugged, "Would you like me better if I curled up in a corner, wailing 'poor me, poor me!'"

Vollinger's chuckle rose to outright laughter then, "No, I like you just fine as you are. It's a pleasure to travel with somebody of your refreshing temperament."

"We'd better get going," I sighed. "Best not to stay in one place for too long anyhow." Everybody nodded, and even Terry gave a hearty woof

that echoed off of the cavern walls.

As promised, we journeyed to Tarant to stock up on supplies. Virgil ducked into a magic shop, though I chose not to follow. He came out carrying several potions as well as a scroll. I visited my favorite junk man and chatted while picking up a few spare parts. We all spent the night at the Bridesdale, and I stayed up for half the night tinkering around with all of my new toys. Unfortunately, I didn't even know what heartstone was let alone where to find it, but it sure wasn't in Tarant. Erick's schematic would have to wait. I did, however, put together the strange rifle that I'd gotten the schematic for on the Isle of Despair... but Vollinger shied away from it, and I certainly wasn't going to use it. Absolutely not.

Afterwards a good night's sleep, better for some than for others, we took off again. I didn't let the lack of sleep bother me, I was growing quite accustomed to lengthy travel and a bit of grass was almost as good as a bed. We made for the Stonewall Mountains once again, this being my third time to visit them. Traveling to the west of the Gulf of Morbihan was quite a lot more pleasant than traveling on its eastern side. The area was a lot more wooded and the grass greener. It was a vast improvement over yellowed plains and oversized rocks. Besides that, the mountains in the distance were quite beautiful when they were clear enough to see, in stark contrast to having Tarant on the horizon.

At last we arrived at the Stonecutter Clan's caverns, but something didn't feel right about it. It seemed to have quite a lot more in common with the Black Mountain Clan than it did with the Wheel Clan. There were no lanterns on the inside and I could hear something scraping and scratching around in the darkness. *Don't tell me that other clans have started disappearing now... how many bloody dwarves are going to just disappear?*

As I rounded a nearby corner I came face to face with a horror I'd not expected to encounter. *Ugh. Bloody zombies! That's disgusting!* The look and smell of the shambling dead was utterly nauseating. I wasted no time in chopping apart all that I came across. Some of them could occasionally be quick, but for the most part I had little difficulties in outmaneuvering them. My combat skills were most certainly

improving.

After chopping my way through well over two dozen of the bastards I came to a suspiciously locked door that seemed to lead further into the caverns. *Please, let there be somebody alive in here. I don't want to be the one to give Thrayne the bad news.* I easily pushed the lock open with my pick and pressed inside. The cavern widened out around me and wound around in several directions before abruptly terminating in sharp wreckage. I picked my way through the wreckage into the room beyond and my jaw dropped open when I saw what was inside.

I'd discovered a foul laboratory of the damned. There were not only another dozen zombies in the room alone, but they were accompanied by a spectral knight that charged me mercilessly. I dodged out of the way of his ghastly sword, quite fearful for the kind of cuts such a blade could make. The knight was slow and I was easily able to dash around him. I swung my axe in an upward arc with both hands, praying that it would be able to damage the ghostly being.

The knight wailed in pain and I gave silent thanks that it was solid enough to be wounded. It was too early to start getting comfortable, however. The blow I'd just landed would've shattered the spine of a normal man yet the knight still fought on. Terry grabbed ahold of the knight's leg and began chewing through it, distracting him so that I could position myself for another strike. Virgil guarded the area I was fighting in, chopping down zombies that dared try to interfere with our duel. Vollinger easily picked off any zombies that broke through Virgil's perimeter.

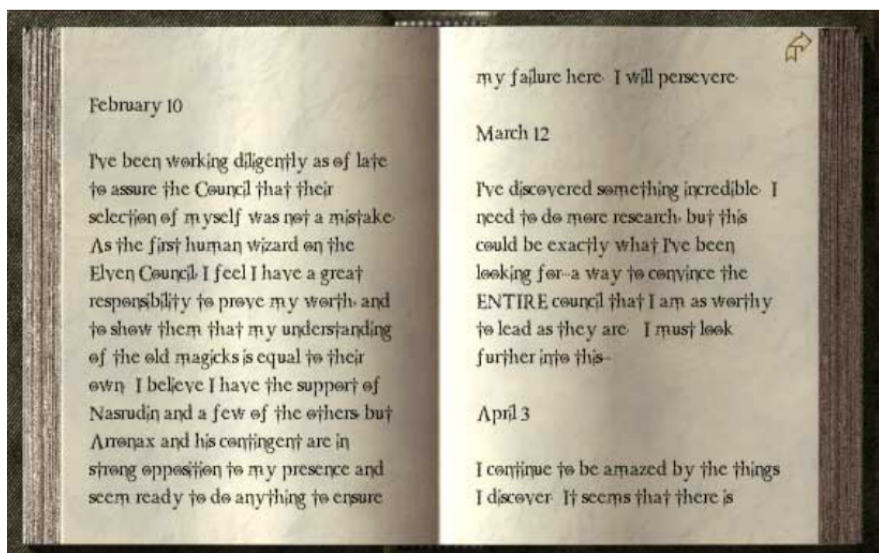
Thank you... for giving me the room to fight, and for trying your best to protect me regardless. I dodged around the knight's blade, feeling it swipe past my leg swiftly. I thought that he'd missed, but the dull pain that slowly came into focus afterward suggested otherwise. I glanced down to see my own blood beginning to stain my armor and I cursed at my ineptitude. Dashing between the oversized knight's leg, I positioned myself behind him once again.

I used my unwounded leg to kick the bastard firmly in the back of the knee, forcing it to bend. The stone cracked where his knee landed,

such was the weight of the horrible being. Still standing on the back of his leg, I swung my axe with all of the might I could muster, landing a solid blow against the back of the his neck. The axe failed to split apart the thick helmet he was wearing, but the force of the blow sent him tumbling to the ground face first. I dared not let my advantage expire. I leapt atop his back and lifted my axe high above my head, bringing it down brutally on the back of his skull. The axe at last pierced that horrible armor and, with one final wail, he finally stopped moving. I stood up and stared at his ghostly body, curious that it did not disappear.

It seemed like my battle had taken so much time that the rest of the zombies were already no more. Virgil and Vollinger had taken care of them nicely, while Terry helped me out with the real threat. I actually felt somewhat embarrassed at how much I'd really needed their help.

I found a rather unusual schematic sitting out on a desk next to an open journal. Taking a closer look I realized it was probably something I could construct if I referred to a few technical manuals. *This might explain a lot. How utterly bizarre.* I slipped the schematic in my purse and flipped through the journal idly.



another side to Necromancy that none of us was ever aware of. Yes, long ago I discovered the power to resurrect the dead, but I never dreamed that I could actually SPEAK with their incorporeal souls! It's incredible! Yes, these poor souls are in pain, but the things they can tell us! I believe I'm on the verge of discovering an entire new College of Magick. Soon I will share my discoveries with the rest of the Council...

May 14

Today I animated the lifeless body of a mountain lion. I'd found the poor creature not far from my laboratory here, expired - it seems from natural causes. To animate the dead is not the same as resurrecting them, as the creature is merely an earthly shell - still dead - being powered by a soul I have trapped within it. It was a pathetic sight and I released the creature's soul not long after, but the possibilities for such an application are endless! Truly, I have found something incredible here...

June 22

I've found that it is possible to pull the very soul from a living being. All of my experiments to date have been upon beasts, but there is no doubt that the spell would work perfectly upon a living, sentient being. Not that I would ever do so, of course, but the curiosity within me burns as this new knowledge opens up to me! I have been given these visions of the lands of the dead, and I must try to understand them. It is both a blessing and a curse, but I must strive forward to the end...

July 6

Nasrudin and an entourage of the Council Members stopped by today, wondering why I've been neglecting my duties. I wanted to tell them what has been happening, but kept quiet as I still have much to learn. Begging some privacy and pretending not to be in the best of health, I promised to resume my duties as fast as I possibly could. I could see in the face of our leader that I was not believed. I haven't much time.

I spoke with the gravekeeper from a town not far from here. He was quite accommodating after I fattened his purse and he should be making a delivery to me by the end of the week.

July 15

My theories were correct. I know that some may look at the things that I've done in the name of magick and call them monstrous, but these shells that I raised and then quenched were already dead to begin with... that I used them to further our knowledge should be of no concern! And now that we can control these spirits, who is to say what is right and wrong

concerning them. I'm no tyrant, but power is control. I now have this power, I and I alone...

August 8

The Council has found out what I've done, and they are furious. Arronax is screaming banishment, and Nasrudin is speechless, and the rest of the Council eyes me with disgust or outright revulsion. Can they not see the power in these things? The importance? I pity them, these poor, unenlightened souls. Caught forever in their shallow thoughts, they whimper like small children, afraid of what they cannot understand. And fear me they should...

November 17

The sentence has been passed, and tomorrow I stand before the council to be banished. I go not into the Void with fear or malice, but merely with anticipation. If this be my death, then it will be a homecoming... perhaps I was never meant to truly be among the living. And if not, then I go with open eyes into the unknown and welcome what I will see there...

I closed the journal and sat down in a nearby chair for several minutes, silent, pondering what I'd just read. Of the five legendary beings that had ever been banished, it made the most sense that the journal would belong to the Great Necromancer, Kerghan. Somehow I had stumbled into his ancient laboratory, and I wasn't the only one. There was no possible way that he was the one to develop the schematic I'd just found. It had to be somebody else, working off of the same principles.

Nevermind the moral questions raised by even beginning work on such a device, I was simply amazed that the Age of Legends seemed to be so much more than a legend itself. Arronax himself was trying to kill me and I now possessed the journals of both Kerghan and Kraka-Tur. I could damn near open a museum that rivaled the one in Tarant. I couldn't wait to show my findings to Frederick. I wanted to see the look on his face when the same chill that had just passed over me passed over him as he realized what I'd given him.

All right, it's time to move on. I didn't really want to linger on in that

laboratory for any longer, and I still had dwarves to find. "Pardon, madam," Vollinger asked, "are you all right?"

I smiled at him. "I'm fine, Vollinger, I just wasn't expecting to find something so amazing here. I've always thought that the Panarii religion and tales of banishment were false, but here I've found the very journal of Kerghan himself."

Virgil gasped and Vollinger seemed fairly surprised as well. "Indeed?! That is the book you were reading?"

I nodded, "Yes. Quite the discovery, don't you think?"

He took a handkerchief out of his pocket and wiped his brow with it, "Yes, that is quite the discovery indeed. No wonder you seemed to be so lost in thought."

I chuckled a bit and said, "Yes, did-" my speech cut off when I saw what was in the next room.

Damn it all. I bloody hate zombies. "We'll talk later, let's take care of these things." The other two nodded and Terry took off into the room, gnawing zombies to the ground like it was a macabre game of dominos. *Now that's a rather dark image.* I charged into the room as well and began swinging away, cleaving another zombie in two with each strike.

The fight wore on for the better part of an hour, zombies pouring into the room from every direction. My arms burned from overuse and my axe hung heavily in my hands. Terry was in desperate need of a bath and Vollinger was very nearly out of ammo. Virgil, surprisingly, was fine. *I suppose I'm glad we stopped at Tarant for you... now if only we'd expected to encounter zombies here instead of dwarves maybe we would've stocked up, too.* I pulled a towel out of my purse and wiped the sweat and gore off of my face and hands before discarding it. I didn't really want to keep it after what I'd just wiped off with it anyway.

On the far end of the room I saw a thick, metal door. It looked only slightly rusty, not nearly as old as the laboratory I'd found just a short

while earlier. I tried to open it, but it was locked shut. I could hear heavy breathing and uneasy voices on the other side. "Hold just a moment, I'll get you out of there!" I shouted. I slipped my lockpick into the lock and I had it open in quite the hurry.

"Thank Alberich you found us! We were liable to starve in there. Damned zombies. You made short work of them though, eh?"

Thank goodness. The dwarves are safe after all. Well, relatively speaking. "What happened here?" I was utterly confused. As far as I knew, zombies couldn't lock doors.

The dwarf kicked the ground sheepishly and chuckled a bit. "I would, ah, be responsible for all this. I found an ancient necromancer's laboratory off an old, abandoned access cavern. In researching his journals, I deduced a way to reproduce what he had done through magick by using scientific principles."

I gritted my teeth. "So that was you? You designed that strange device and created all these zombies? That was a bit irresponsible."

He held up his hands in a gesture of alarm, "I assure you it was an accident! The first one I created began an awful, horrific screeching and flailing about. It knocked over my chemicals and before I knew what was happening they were coming out of the floor. They were everywhere! Luckily, I was able to get back here to warn everyone."

I sighed, "Whatever. I'm looking for Erland Iron Heart. Do you know him?"

He grinned and stared at me, "Of course I know him. I'm him."

Ugh. Of course you are. "Your brother sent me to ask you to go home." He shakes his head.

"Thrayne, poor Thrayne. He's been so overprotective of me since our father died. He blames himself for it, you know."

I'd be overprotective of anybody that carelessly spawned an army of zombies, nearly destroying an entire clan of dwarves single handedly. The next thing he knows you might design a machine with the sole purpose of lopping off your own head. "What happened to your father?"

Erland started to push me out of the way and head for the exit. "I'd rather not speak of it anymore. I'd best be on my way home so that my dear brother doesn't worry himself to death."

Then why the bloody hell did you even mention it? "Fair enough. I will be going, too. These passages are safe now, so the others can come out and, er... start cleaning things up, I suppose." I didn't feel particularly right about sending away the man who was responsible for the mess before he could clean it up, so I beat a hasty retreat. After another 'quick' stop at Tarant, for some more supplies and a desperately needed bath, the four of us returned to the Wheel Clan.

As much as I wanted to explore around the majestic dwarven caverns further, I first had to visit Thrayne's room to tell him that his brother should be around soon. "Hello again, Thrayne. I found your brother for you."

He looked up at me curiously, his face a mixture of annoyance and hope, "What did my errant brother have to say?"

"That he'll be returning shortly. He had a bit of a mishap there." *I do believe that to be the greatest understatement that has ever been made in all of Arcanum. One might just as well call the Gulf of Morbihan a creek.*

I'd only piqued Thrayne's curiosity further. "A mishap? Of what nature?" I could tell by his voice that he was genuinely concerned for his brother's safety.

I can't very well hide it, and I've no reason to anyway. "He discovered how to make zombies through technology."

He holds his head in his hands, as if in pain.

"I am afraid to ask, kowing my brother, but what happened?"

"I had to rescue them, they were besieged by zombies." I shrugged as though it were no big deal, although I still remembered the great delight I took in bathing once I got to Tarant. The only reason I got out of the bath as quickly as I did was so there would be warm water left for Terry.

Thrayne nearly exploded in anger, though it was hardly directed

towards me. "That damned tinkering fool! He could have killed the whole clan! It seems I owe you my thanks."

You owe me thanks? After you insulted me by saying humans don't have the right to technology I think you owe me a little more than thanks.

"Your thanks? How about some coin?"

He grunted and counted out several coins, handing them to me. "If you are so coarse an individual, so be it. Here's 200 coins for your trouble."

I smiled at him, "Thanks, it was a pleasure doing business." I did feel a pang of guilt as I left his room. I wasn't exactly aiding his perception of humanity as a whole, and it wasn't as though I really needed the coins. At best I was being awfully petty.

With the other tasks out of the way I set about finding the Dredge. I crept around near the entrance until I found another stairway down. There was a suspicious lack of guards and I didn't know how long they planned on remaining away so I darted inside. There were chests full of various ores and minerals, most of them locked or trapped. I bypassed the locks easily enough, but Virgil wasted more than a bit of effort healing me from the damned traps.

The passageway wound around in many different directions, seemingly twisting upon itself. After a good several minutes I began to wonder what all of the nasty rumors had been about. I hadn't seen even one damned beast and I was almost disappointed. At last I spotted something as I rounded a corner and I was every bit as surprised as I was hoping to be, though not in the same way I expected. I'd found, of all things, dwarves.

"I hope you are well."

"Hello, sir. Might I ask who you are?" *While you're at it, could you please tell me why you're not a hideous beast that's trying to kill me? I've been horribly misled.*

The dwarf was covered in a unique combination of soot and tattoos, and he looked up at me with intensity. "My name is Arvid Millstone and I'm the foreman here in the Wheel Clan Mines."

Mines...? Not the abandoned mines you call the Dredge? Blast it, I didn't figure on them having multiple mines. I suppose I thought they'd just... I don't know... stopped mining. "A pleasure, Arvid. Why are all these miners standing here?"

He looked at the other dwarves who all either shrugged or nodded before looking back at me, having gotten their permission to tell the outsider. "Well, madam, there's been some trouble here in the mines as of late. We blasted a new tunnel a few days ago, and I've been losing miners ever since." He paused, shivering noticeably, before continuing his story. "Sometimes, when you dig this deep, you find things that weren't ever supposed to be found. I think there's something bad back there, something evil..."

Hogwash. Evil is just a convenient excuse for why some folk are worse than others. "Seems like you might need some assistance here, Arvid..." *I'll show you it's nothing to be worried about.*

"Hmmm. You're a braver soul than I. I've seen things down here you wouldn't believe, but whatever's back there has got me stone-scared. Your assistance would be much appreciated, stranger, although I don't know if I'd recommend ANYONE going back there..."

"I've no doubt I'll be up to the task, Arvid..." For whatever reason, I just wasn't scared of whatever thing they seemed to think was so horrible. I came down expecting the Dredge, where nobody had been for years. This was just some old mine.

The foreman glanced at my axe, noticing the wear on the blade, and then at my companions, noting we could probably be considered adventurers. I hated that term. "Perhaps you might be. I can't offer you anything for the job, but I know that the dwarves of the Wheel Clan would be most grateful if you were to destroy what's been killing all of our miners."

You could've offered payment you know. "Hmmm. That's not payment enough for the risk. Good day, sir..." Like an idiot, I refused to help him and then strode off right into the mine. *Well, I'm at least going to find out what it is. I just don't guarantee I'll kill it if you're not going to pay me for it.*

No sooner had I rounded the next corner than I came face to face

with a mass of tiny, crawly little spiders. I hated spiders with a passion, but hacking them to bits came both easily and naturally. It was hard to feel remorse for mangling a spider, and that made the fighting all that much easier for me.

The passageways were numerous, as I would expect for a mine, and the spiders infested nearly all of them. *Spiders? You've got a problem with spiders? Good heavens, are you dwarves or housewives?* A lump caught in my throat as I rounded the final corner of the mines. I'd explored every other passage without finding anything truly horrible so whatever was around the next corner had to be it.

I first noticed the massive, white spider that stood at least as tall as I did. It was unnerving, mostly because it disgusted me, but that wasn't what bothered me. I wasn't even bothered by the other half a dozen spiders in the room that were all the size of Terry. What truly made me want to run screaming were the piles of eggs littered across the side of the room, piled upon each other haphazardly. I shuddered uncontrollably and charged into the room.

The creature's skin was hard and resilient, but my axe punctured through it and cleaved a leg from its body. It hissed at me violently, but I pressed my attack, chopping into its body with a brutal force only made possible through abject disgust. I wanted desperately to rid the world of the existence of the foul creature and everything it had thus far spawned. Beneath my assault it finally relented, settling into a jagged heap upon the ground at my feet.

Terry had already ripped apart a few of the smaller spiders and the other two were helping out in that regard as well. I joined in the extermination efforts, ridding the mines and hopefully the world of the last of those awful things. At last I pulled a box of brewer's yeast out of my purse and thoroughly mixed it up with a bottle of wine I'd been carrying. I poured the makeshift fuel all over the eggs in that foul corner of the mine and lit them on fire. There wasn't a single complaint, just the gentle crackling of the flames. We all watched as the last of the eggs burned out and then we turned back towards the entrance of the mine.

Might as well let the cheapskates know it's dead. I walked back up to

Arvid and greeted him. "I've killed those creatures, by the way. They seemed to be a family of crystalline spiders... dreadful beasts..."

"I've heard legends about Dread Crystal Spiders... perhaps you ran into some of those. I never actually thought they were real..."

He shivers again.

"Thank you, my friend... the Wheel Clan is indebted to you."

"Good day to you." *I've just saved your hides and you don't even spare a single coin. Bloody cheapskates.* As annoyed as I was, I felt good about what I'd done. Even if it was just for my own reasons I'd still done quite a good thing. I was proud of myself. My pettier side would get over the lack of payment in due time.

Chapter the Thirty Fifth: On Diplomatic Relations With Stone Kings

After helping out the dwarven miners, it occurred to me that getting permission to enter the Dredge would be a rather trivial task. I didn't want to try sneaking past the guards if there was an easy way to avoid it, and it would also be wise to remain on their good side. I wandered off towards the throne room, in the direction the entrance guard had pointed me what seemed like so long ago. The hallway leading up to it was wide and heavily guarded. Dwarves wearing suits of finely crafted plate lined the walls at even intervals, not even moving a muscle as I walked past. Their patience and discipline was remarkable

The hallway itself had to be at least twice my height, which was particularly impressive considering I was in the home of dwarves. Even a half ogre would be comfortable visiting here. I proceeded past massive torches that looked as though they'd been burning steadily for years and, at last, I was admitted through a thick set of double doors made out of pure mithril. They swung open far too gently and easily to be made of steel, and the peculiar blue luster betrayed their true nature.

"Greetings, traveler."

The King greeted me coldly as I entered his well-decorated throne room. It was about then that I realized I'd entirely forgotten to change back into more suitable attire and I was still parading around in my combat gear. It was not only rude to a dwarf of such high stature, but I also smelled like a sewer. Embarrassed, I choked out, "I'm sorry, I don't believe we've met..."

The dwarf nodded proudly and introduced himself, "I am Randver Thunder Stone, son of Loghaire Thunder Stone. I stand as chieftain

and King-in-Waiting of all the dwarves, both over- and under-mountain, in the lands of Arcanum. Welcome to the caverns of the Wheel Clan."

Bloody hell, Loghaire's not even here, I get his bloody twit of a son instead. I secretly fumed, hoping Randver wouldn't notice. I had been hoping to take care of my other business while asking permission to go into the Dredge and now things were growing increasingly more complicated. "King-in-Waiting, you say?"

"Yes. My father is unavailable, and I rule in his stead. But I am not the true King and will not be as long as my father lives. I am only a King-in-waiting."

Well, at least Loghaire's still around. "I see. I'm in need of your assistance.... I come with news of a most dire nature, related to the Black Mountain Clan." I told him of my suspicious encounter with Stennar, and my subsequent searches of the Black Mountain Clan mines and the Isle of Despair. "There were no signs of the Black Mountain Clan on the Isle of Despair either, and I even brought Thorvald Two Stones back to confirm it." Randver listened patiently and when I finished he remained lost in thought for quite some time before speaking.

"This troubles me, my friend. We were given assurances by Alberich! Assurances! Bloody meddling... oh, just cast them all to the dark depths!"

It seemed like Randver had some information for me after all. I supposed talking with Loghaire wouldn't really be necessary as long as I knew where I could go next. Obviously the Black Mountain Clan dwarves weren't holed up in the caverns of the Wheel Clan, and I didn't plan on giving up my search for them. "Blast who? The elves? What is going on here?"

Randver shook his head sadly, "This is an old and dark business... the business of my father. And as I am his heir, it falls to me to make this right. But I know not what to do! He told me so little..."

Oh hell, I'm going to have to talk to the true King anyway, aren't I? I sighed, "Please tell me what happened to your father, Randver." Visibly shaken.

"My father! Great Solid Loghaire Thunder-Stone! King of the

Dwarves! Do you know of him, stranger? The stories of his courage, of his strength, of his wisdom? My father, stone among stones... from the madness of the Clan Wars he united us under one banner, under one King, through the sheer power of his will."

He sounds like a wonderful dwarf... who happens to have exiled the entire Black Mountain Clan to god knows where and now he's conspicuously absent when I want to ask him about it. I remembered once again these Clan Wars that Thrayne had neglected to tell me about and thought I might be able to get some more information out of Randver. It was off topic, but dammit I was curious. "The Clan Wars?"

"Yes... a sad time in our history," he began. *Finally, somebody that's willing to talk to me even if I do smell like a sewer.* "For five-hundred years, there was a rift among the dwarves. We built great machines of war, and threw ourselves against one another, and entire clans were lost in the battles. A dark time, the time of Lorek's insanity. We speak very little of that time..."

Yes, I've noticed. "Who was Lorek?" I didn't want the flow of information to stop so shortly after it had started.

Randver glared at me firmly, "I've said we don't often speak of it. That's a conversation for another time, perhaps..."

Dwarves also seem to have an odd fascination with mentioning things they'd rather not talk about. I steered the topic of conversation back onto its proper course. "Where is Loghaire, Randver? What happened to him?"

"It broke his heart, that heavy stone heart! He, who warred against Lorek the Abjurer in the pass of Gorgoth... who in victory buried Lorek alive along with ten thousand of his dwarven followers. And this! This broke him like a child upon the stones of the world."

Hmph. If you're not going to speak of Lorek, then don't bloody speak of him. Gudmund had mentioned betrayal, and Randver's words assured me that the tale of the betrayer was going to be an interesting one. Far more interesting than the tale of Bates' betrayal, although that, too, was a story I looked forward to sharing one day. "Please, Randver. I need to know what has happened here..."

Randver shook his head and visibly calmed himself before continuing on. "It is as the Ore Bender told you. My father permitted the banishment of his own people. By the elves. He watched them sent away, heard their cries, with hardness born of a hundred generations of Thunder Stones.

"My father came home, and upon his knees cried out for his lost, foolish brethren. Tears of regret, stranger. Regret, shame, and sorrow. The caverns shook with his fury, shook at the impact of his hands upon bare stone. He tore the clothes from his body, and set his bulk against the walls and the floors, and his sorrow was marked in blood.

"He left us... walked into the old caverns with nothing but Harrow, first-axe of the Thunder Stones. And with that weapon he disappeared, exiled by his own grief, and left the Wheel Clan. He's never returned."

This time it was me who stayed silent as his story finished. It seemed as though I'd judged Loghaire perhaps too harshly. There was definitely more at work here than I'd initially realized and I intended to find out what. "I'm very sorry, Randver, but I must get to the bottom of this. Please, tell me what the elves have to do with this."

"The elves? It was they who demanded the banishment of the Black Mountain Clan for their crimes? But as for the reasons... as I said, I know very little. My father never told me the details of his discussions with them, only that what had been decided was necessary, and that the responsibility would be his..."

"What crimes? What had the Black Mountain Clan done?" I had my suspicion, but I wanted to hear it from Randver's mouth. I didn't want to presume to know any detail, lest I miss something else of greater importance.

Randver grew angry again, and I couldn't really blame him for it. "Technology! Manipulation of natural force, the stone- and gearworks that make men gods! This, our legacy, given into the hands of reckless children. And the disease has spread... and the cost, stranger! Oh, the bloody cost...!"

I tried to calm him down, get him to focus on what was really

important to the discussion. "Gudmund spoke of Gilbert Bates...?"
"Bates! It was Bates who spread technology and its diseases... and who are we to blame him? Humans! Cursed with brevity, lacking patience, lacking discernment. I've spent long times deciding on what type of stone to use in a mural, and look what they've done in only a few turns of the moon. And with this these elves came to us, speaking of punishments..."

Yes, that's more the information I'm looking for. "Who were these elves?"

Randver calmed, and slumped his shoulders. "I've no idea. And I know not why my father felt it necessary to speak with them, nor to heed their demands. As King, my father never should have allowed them to interfere, but for some reason he allowed it. He's never spoken a word about it since."

Something still seemed utterly strange about the whole situation. The question of 'why' Loghaire had given in to the elves was one that desperately needed answering, and the sooner the better. "What did the rest of the clans say?"

"The other clans never knew that the elves were involved in the banishment. They were only told that the Black Mountain Clan had been exiled... banished for their crimes, and my father was the only one present when the sentence was passed..."

It all comes down to this after all. Although it would be helpful to get all of the information I could before leaving Randver, that time was rapidly coming upon me. Loghaire simply hadn't told anybody else enough information for me to be able to continue. "It seems I'll have to speak with Loghaire. Where is he?"

Randver fixed his gaze upon me again, firm and unbending. "I told you... he exiled himself. He walked into the Dredge, and has never returned..."

Dam- wait, actually, I was going to go there anyway. I suppose this will work out fine. "Where can I find the Dredge?"

He sighed heavily, "The entrance is just beyond the entrance to these chambers and to the southeast. There you will find a stone archway.

Beyond that you will find the Dredge, into which my father disappeared..."

I was hesitant to go to the bottom of a dark and abandoned mine without having any idea of what I would even say to Loghaire. I didn't want to barge in on him and simply start levelling accusations. What I really needed was more information, even if Randver didn't seem like he had any more to give. I decided to try anyway. Sometimes getting the right answer is all in the wording of the question. "There is one thing I don't understand, Randver. Why, exactly, was your father so ashamed?"

He scoffed aloud, incredulous that I even bothered to ask. "That's a complicated discussion, friend. One I'm not sure you'd fully be able to understand..."

I looked at him straight in the eyes, making a show of my determination. "I believe my mental powers are up to the task..." "Hmmm. Perhaps you are correct. Fine. My father's reasons for leaving are tied up in ageless tradition... truly in his opinion he had no option other than to leave his clan. He was only doing what he saw to be his only choice."

Yes, this is exactly what I was looking for... if I understand him then it will be easier to gain his trust. Loghaire certainly wasn't going to tell a suspicious stranger details of his sorrowful past that he hadn't even shared with his own son. Getting him to trust me would be crucial. "You spoke of dwarven traditions... of which do you speak?"

He seemed to struggle with the words, trying to think of a good way to explain things in terms a human could understand. "Perhaps tradition is the wrong word. Philosophy might be a better one, though we dwarves rarely consider ourselves philosophers. A philosophy, as most know it, infers a certain amount of subjective opinion, and a particular open-mindedness towards other trains of thought. What I speak of is different..."

"I'm talking about the stuff of dwarven souls, the tenets we live by, our moral fiber... though morality plays no part in it. Not morality as most know it. What I speak of, friend, is what is known as the Stone

and the Shape...

"To be a Dwarf... what does this mean? Our character is defined through the immovability, the solidity of stone. We dwarves see the soul not as something ephemeral or transient... but as rooted in this reality as the mountains from which we carve our homes... do you understand?"

Dwarves and stone... is he trying to say that they refer to stone as the trait all dwarves share in common? "I think so, but could you explain a bit further...?"

"Take this mountain... the sight of him against the horizon can set our hearts afire and with throaty and tear-choked cries we'll call greetings or farewell. But to live within him, feel himself shifting and settling, cracking veins filled with blood of gold and silver... and he is both hard and generous, and we rejoice in both because we are Dwarves." Describing dwarves as stony was indeed appropriate, even by their standards. I supposed it should've hardly surprised me. "Common dwarven traits, yes... but is there more?"

He continued, "Yes... I speak both metaphorically and literally... we are dwarves, and there is much about us that is like the stone. We feel no more at home than when it surrounds us, and it carries to us the roar of the great molten flows, or the slow whine of subterranean ocean-rivers, or, when all is quiet, mountain-whispers so steeped in age that even the stars were young when they were first spoken.

"And so... to understand this is to understand a part of what makes us dwarves... these loves are immovable and unchangeable, and so we are like the Stone."

I nodded, following along with his explanation easily, "I see. But what of the Shape?"

"The Shape is what FORMS us, what defines our being and our purpose. As there are many types of stone, so are there as many shapes. Granite for bridges, oilstones for tools, marble for statues, and crystal for the fragile..."

I see... where Stone refers to the commonalities between dwarves, Shape refers to the differences. "Elaborate a little further, please..."

He thought about it hard, once again struggling with his words, "How can I make this more clear for you? A stone yields what is already within, and so we, as Dwarves, look within and see what it is we are to become."

"So it is the Shape that defines what the Stone becomes?" I was genuinely interested in what Randver was taking the time to explain to me, and I felt I was grasping the concepts quite naturally.

"This is the most important concept. One cannot exist without the other. To a certain degree, Shape does define what the Stone becomes... flint makes a good striking stick... but the reverse is just as true... you can't make a good striking stick without flint. Shape arises from Stone, but Stone is dependent upon Shape...

"It is perhaps stated most simply in this way. As slate will flake and crack under the sculptor's chisel, so will a dwarf who knows not his purpose, knows not his Shape."

I was starting to see some of the difficulty that Randver had putting it into words. Certainly, while similar, the concepts he was illustrating were quite different from human ones. "So... Stone and Shape define your morality?"

"Precisely... you seem to understand us very well. Dwarven morality... the choices we make at the most basic level is defined by us being dwarves. Work ethic, love of family, respect of wisdom... these are our morality. We see them not as choices because, as dwarves, it's merely being who we are. Stone is the existence of these things... Shape is their expression."

I felt confident that I had a good handle on the concepts and then sought to apply them to the situation at hand. *Hmph. What am I trying to do, anyhow? I'm just a thief, I know nothing of morality.* "So, Stone and Shape, in terms of your father..."

Randver suddenly looked very sad, and I couldn't entirely blame him. He had to feel sorry for his father, understand what his father was feeling. If he hadn't he never would've bothered explaining everything to me. "My father left us because he had betrayed both his Stone and his Shape. He felt that allowing the elves to banish his

brethren was a betrayal of his Stone. The same act was also a betrayal of his Shape, being King of the Dwarves. Without either, he was empty."

Thinking back to the Clan Wars I remembered a villain that Randver had mentioned and I felt it pertinent to the current discussion. "And what of Lorek the Abjurer?"

"Lorek was a dwarf who had betrayed his Stone... he believed that his clan was better than those of other dwarves, and because of this only they were fit to rule. Anyone who opposed him was put to death. His words were evil, but he spoke them well. Many a dwarf followed him, and many more died because of it."

I was finally starting to truly understand. "Lorek's Stone was flawed... his Shape could be no different..."

Randver smiled at me, obviously pleased that I understood. "Well spoken, my friend. You've wisdom beyond your years."

I smiled back, proud of myself for having understood everything so quickly. "And your opinion of your father's choice?"

He frowned and looked away, still speaking, "There are times, my friend, when the choices we are forced to make cannot be true to both the Shape and the Stone. I have thought long and hard on the issue... I have not the answers. But I know my father is a dwarf among dwarves. There is a saying among us... 'Weigh your own Stone'. It is not for me to decide."

I reached out and shook Randver's hand, and he gladly shook mine in return. "Thank you, Randver. I feel I better understand your father." "No, thank you, my friend. Few are the outlanders who would even care to ask. It is good that I've shared these things with you today." "Can we continue our previous discussion?" *I think I'm just about ready to pay Loghaire a visit.*

Randver nodded, "Certainly... where were we?"

I glanced at him with a knowing look, "Surely YOU must have some idea as to your father's whereabouts?"

Perhaps to the casual observer he seemed calm and unaffected, but I could tell he was a bit nervous. I could see beads of sweat forming on his brow and his voice was just the slightest bit uneven. "Why would you think that? If a dwarf wants to be alone, then a dwarf stays alone..."

"Randver," I admonished him, "You're his son and his heir. You'd have gone looking for him for sure."

"And why? He left me here to run a kingdom, and rule it I will! What sort of son would I be to... just go mucking around in the dark looking for a father who doesn't care?"

He was starting to lose his composure beneath my questioning. *I wonder if I was always this good at reading people. No, there's nothing to wonder about... if Frederick and Nathaniel taught me anything it's that I was a damned fool when it came to such things.* "Your anger is hollow. You need not protect him from me."

Randver sighed and smirked at me sheepishly. "You see more than most, my friend. You're correct... I hold no animosity towards my father. My heart breaks every day that he is gone..."

I pressed onward, "I seek the truth, Randver. I think your father would want that as well. Do you not think he would wish to hear of the treachery wrought by the elves?"

He slowly nodded, "I believe you stranger, I truly do. I just might be able to point you in the right direction. I must admit it... you're correct in more ways than you know. I do see my father, almost every day, although he says very little. He lives deep within the Dredge, but I have a hidden passage through which I travel and, within it, you will encounter no trouble. Just enter here... there's a secret passage under the throne. I trust you, stranger. Find your answers. Do what is right. I pray he will tell you what you need to know."

I patted Randver on the shoulder gently. "I'll most certainly try. Thank you for your help, Randver."

I slipped into the passageway that he pointed out to me and I saw the dim flicker of a lit fire in the distance. Quickly, while still under the

cover of darkness, I slipped my dress back on and hastily tossed my armor into my purse. I wandered near the fire and at last I came upon him exactly as Randver had told me. A proud and old dwarf, buck naked, carrying nothing but an axe.

"What? Who dares disturb the exile of Thunder Stone?"

I bent one knee to the ground respectfully and spoke to him with my head down, "Forgive me, your highness. I had no choice but to-"

He interrupted me with a great shout that rang throughout the room and in my ears. "Quiet! This insolence is unforgivable! The violation of my ancient right for solitude in exile is not broken so easily! Your life hangs in the balance, stranger! Speak quickly, let you taste of the fury of Harrow." He lifted his axe up at me menacingly and started to step forward.

I stood up and held my arm out to stop Virgil from charging. "Wait a moment! I come here with the blessing of your son!"

"My son? Randver? He would dare permit such an affront? I've come here to writhe upon the blade of my sorrow, to live the thousand deaths by the ancient right of Kings. These laws are passed down through the mountain from the beginning of remembered time. Your life is forfeit to them, as is my own. Do you understand?"

He raises the axe in his hand...

"Stop already!" I pleaded. *I know what'll shut you up.* "I come with news of the Black Mountain Clan!"

The axe lowered slightly in his hands and an expression of shock came over his face. "What? How do you know...? Speak quickly. Your life still hangs in the balance..."

Will you PLEASE stop threatening me? "Loghaire, I've been to the Isle of Despair in search of them. They aren't there. I don't know where they are, but I spoke with Stennar Rock Cutter just as he died. He spoke of evil and some sort of device... he said he escaped, but I'm not sure from where."

Loghaire was silent and finally his axe dropped to the ground. "I've no words, no words. My crime, it seems, is even more heinous than I thought. I deserve much worse than this mere isolation..."

"Loghaire," I insisted, "Please, I need to know exactly what happened." *Moping about isn't going to make it right any more than running away absolved me of my own sins...*

"In all the time since the judgment was passed, I have never spoken of it. My shame has held my tongue. It seems that very shame shall now finally bring the betrayal to light..."

I was practically about to get on my hands and knees to beg him. He was so obsessed with himself and his betrayal that he was blind to what was in front of him. "Please... these elves who approached you... who were they?"

He sighed and finally looked at me, willing to speak at last. "A delegation of elves, sent from the Silver Lady herself. They came not long after Bates had built his first steam engine. Technology in the hands of the humans had spread and advanced at an alarming rate... and the elves were hit first, and hardest.

"Their forests... their forests were being cleared with the help of technology - massive steam-powered clear-cutters. The oldest groves, towering and untouched for thousands of years, were being destroyed without prejudice. I saw much of this with my own eyes... the ancient forest of Morbihan is little more than a graveyard now."

Wait... Morbihan? But the elves live in the Glimmering Forest. "Were there elves living in the forests of Morbihan?"

"I'm unsure, but I don't believe so... but the delegation said that the crimes were against ALL elves. You see, elves feel a very strong connection to the world, to nature, and especially to forests. It's said that elven souls reside in the oldest trees... I don't know if this is true, but I do know there to be a strong connection between living things and..."

Something didn't seem quite right about the tale he was relating, but I didn't feel that dwelling on the forest any longer would be productive. It was certainly possible that the elves were greatly upset by the clear-cutters, even if it seemed strange. "Why did technology spread so fast among the humans?" I was legitimately curious on that point, being interested in technology myself.

He glared at me partially with disgust and partially with a strange curiosity of his own. "There are many reasons. Humans, in

comparison with the other races, live such short lives. Because of this, I believe that every human action is motivated through fear... the fear of death. You would think that this was a relative issue... that humans would learn to live with this limitation and accept it. This is not true...

"And, therefore, humans, when confronted with any situation, see it through the veil of their own mortality. Achieve, advance, perform... humans are constantly driven by the shadow of their own death. This fear, unfortunately, clouds their judgment, deadens their sense of right and wrong. Humans act first, think later, and feel last of all... "When Bates was given a look at our technology, he was overcome. As a human, his first thought was: "What can I use this for?" when it should have been: "What is the cost of its use?" Technology exploded in their hands because they are NOT burdened with our longevity... humans rarely live long enough to see the consequences of their mistakes."

So you're trying to say that I'm a devil because I'm afraid of death? That is, unfortunately for me, likely to be true. I wasn't particularly comfortable with the topic, so I changed it again. "You mentioned the Silver Lady... who is she?" I knew the answer, of course, but I couldn't think of a better way to change the topic.

The tone in which Loghaire spoke was actually one of respect and reverence. Even despite his troublesome history with the elves he still held the Lady in high esteem. "The Silver Lady is mother-Queen to the elves. She is very old... much older than I, and very powerful in the ways of magick."

His attitude, more than anything, actually made me wonder just how certain he was of his own past. "And you say it was she that was angered by what had happened to the forests?"

He looked at me again, thinking about it anew as he explained it to me. "The delegation told me that she was extremely hurt and angry about the damage that had been done... according to them, because of her age and power, she was hurt the most by the clearing... her connection to the forests was strongest of all."

"...but you never actually spoke to her directly." I clarified.

"No... I'm not sure if any but elven eyes have ever been laid upon her. Over the years we have corresponded through messengers. Elves and dwarves are very different, and we tend to stay away from one another. But our relationship, as culturally strained as it may be, has always been civil. We don't necessarily understand one another, but we've always respected the differences..."

"Where does she live?" It was somewhat of a stupid question considering she probably lived in the city of elves, but I supposed it would be wise to make sure. It was a good habit to not assume anything was true, no matter how obvious it seemed.

"In Qintarra... the oldest city of the elves, somewhere within the Glimmering Forest." I was thankful that Loghaire seemed so willing to talk, even when I blurted out stupid questions.

I didn't know quite where I was going with the conversation, but I felt that I was chasing a valid point. I just didn't yet know exactly what. "You mentioned there are major differences between the races of dwarves and elves. Would you mind elaborating on those for me?" "I've said before that there is a strong connection between living things and magick, and the magick flows the most strongly in the veins of elves. Dwarves are very different... we feel a strong connection to the earth, but in another way... we love those things which are eternal, unchangeable. Earth, Stone, Metal. In those things are strength, but not life as you know it..."

I finally figured it out, I only had left to make him realize the conclusion that I'd arrived at. "And the elven delegation? What did they demand of you?"

Loghaire put his head in his hands, feeling further shame at the memories I asked him to recall. "They said that if the Black Mountain Clan was not punished, there would be war. War! I told them that a punishment was already being decided upon and that we, as dwarves, would deal with them. They refused... they claimed rights as the afflicted, and therefore as the judges. They agreed that exile was a suitable punishment... but they wanted to be the vessel of that retribution."

Not very elf-like, were they? "Are the elves a warlike people? Is it in

their nature?"

He shook his head, slowly beginning to realize what I was driving at. "No... I know that there was a time of violence, many years ago, among the elves... but from what I know of them, they are a very rational, peace-loving people. They know that, ultimately, war benefits no one. I was very surprised when they came and threatened it."

Think about it, Loghaire! "Don't you find that odd? There seem to be some inconsistencies here."

"Yes... the more we talk about it, I begin to get the same feeling. Yes, the elves would have been angry, but would they really have threatened war? Morbihan was a tragedy, but it directly affected none of the elven communities. Perhaps my fear blinded me to such things before. And now this mystery!... where are the dwarves of the Black Mountain Clan?"

Loghaire didn't strike me as the kind of dwarf who would make such a decision lightly. He had to have his reasons, and those would be the very same reasons he had exiled himself to the Dredge. "What was it you feared, Loghaire? Why agree to the terms?"

He stared at the ground shamefully, obviously disgusted with his own actions. "I am very old, stranger. You may know nothing of me, but believe me when I tell you that I've seen enough dwarven blood spilled to fill a thousand lifetimes. Have you any idea what it would mean for there to be a war between the elves and the dwarves? Arcanum itself would not survive the conflict! And I was so very tired of filling tombs with the bodies of my people..."

I'm not sure that warrants exile, Loghaire. "But-"

"But nothing!" he shouted, interrupting me. "I chose to spare the dwarves... the world!... the price of such a war. What was one clan's honor in comparison with the sheer cataclysm that would result otherwise? You ask what right they had? None. They merely forced a choice... and I chose the path of least resistance, the least pain. That was my betrayal, stranger."

I shook my head in disagreement, "What do you mean?! You were

merely acting out of concern!"

"But that is the point! I am King of the Dwarves! It is my responsibility to lead them, to protect them... but most importantly, it's my responsibility to defend their honor, their dwarven honor. By allowing my own fear or concern, regardless of how justified that fear might be, to overshadow their honor was an unforgivable transgression..."

Loghaire was being needlessly stubborn, refusing to see things any differently. After the length of time he'd been exiled I was likely very naive to think I could convince him otherwise. "Being a King isn't always easy..."

Loghaire's voice boomed throughout the tiny room, deep and confident. Even coming from a dwarf in such a sad state as he, in a dirty, uneven, and poorly lit cavern... still it commanded respect. The blood of Kings truly flowed throughout his veins. "Even as King, the choice is NEVER mine as to whether even ONE dwarf is stripped of his honor. I should have brought this to the people, or just flatly refused from the beginning! I was a coward, a failure... and this exile is my punishment. Given the choice now, I would have waged war against ALL of Arcanum to uphold the honor of that foolish little clan..."

I stood across from him and stared him in the eyes, utterly convinced of what I was about to say. "I know, I know. That's because your Stone is still true..."

He seemed shocked once again, almost as shocked as he had been when I first told him of the Black Mountain Clan. "What? What do you know of the nature of dwarven Stone? You, an outsider? How could you possibly know of such things?"

I insisted, "Randver put his faith in me... perhaps you could as well." *Not all humans are as dumb and impatient as you think we are... just most of them.*

"Perhaps..." he started to admit, but then suddenly remembered that I was, in fact, a human. "But you are not even a dwarf! These are beliefs and concepts it takes a lifetime to reconcile. How could you possibly begin to understand how I feel?"

Arrogance is not becoming of a King. The very fact that I haven't been contemplating this for my entire life gives me a unique perspective. "I know that it is difficult to live by both Stone and Shape."

"Yes, I know. I've thought long and hard about this. Dwarven Stone tells me that ANY transgression against our honor is unthinkable. But my Shape, as King, as their father, told me to protect them. I'd shouldered so much of their pain. I could do it no longer..."

Of course. They were in conflict, there was no easy decision, but even still you only betrayed one... "But, isn't part of life defining that Shape? Learning from mistakes?"

He looked at me oddly, as if he couldn't quite believe I was saying the things he was hearing. "Yes. Your words sound true, stranger. I know that no man is flawless. BUT, I also know that each man's load to bear is different. A larger load carries more responsibility. Mine is heaviest of all... therefore the price for my betrayal must be the most costly..."

It still seemed to me like he was was making a grievous error somewhere in his thoughts, and I intended to find out exactly what it was. "What is the nature of that betrayal?"

He paused, suddenly unsure of himself. He continued shakily, not understanding my meaning. "The nature of the betrayal? I've failed my people... isn't that what is most important here? The betrayal was against their Stone... it seems, sadly, that my own Stone is flawed..."

That's not it at all... "No... that was Lorek's flaw. You may have betrayed the Black Mountain Clan, but you did so out of concern and love... you wanted to protect as many dwarves as you could, and that's proof that your Stone is still true. Yours is a conflict of Shape... you failed in your duty as a King to uphold the honor of that clan." "You shame me, stranger. Your words are harsh... but undeniably true. Perhaps you are correct... but it doesn't change what I've done, nor the price I need to pay. It is best if you just leave an old dwarf here to rot... it is your place to right this wrong..."

No, no, no. I have a journey I must continue on. I am NOT the King of the

dwarves. "No. YOU must pay the price. I cannot do this for you."

He seemed confused, and at last he desperately looked to me for an answer, believing in me to guide him onto the correct path. His wordless question hung heavily in the air. It was a strange and powerful feeling to have such an incredible dwarf hanging on my every word, and I was careful not to abuse it. "You must return to your people. Be true to Stone AND Shape."

"By Alberich! You are right! I've been blinded by my own shame and not seen the true betrayal. I've betrayed myself and my people along with me. I shall return, stranger! I shall be King! By the name of Thunder-Stone, I swear it!"

It doesn't make up for the evils I've committed in my lifetime, but... may the gods go easy on me when my own soul is weighed. "I'm so very glad I could help, Loghaire. Before you return, would you mind giving me some information?"

He smiled at me genuinely, and I realized it was the first time during our entire conversation that I'd seen him actually happy. "Of course... I'll do anything within my power to help you."

I returned his sentiment, pleased that I could be of assistance. "These elves who came to you... could you please tell me how I can find them?"

He thought about it a long time, finally responding, "As I said, they were supposedly sent from the Silver Lady. I know very little of them. But I do have a name... perhaps that will be enough for you to uncover this mystery. The delegation was sent by someone named M'in Gorad, and I had many correspondences with this elf. Here is a letter that was sent to me by him." Loghaire picked up a dirty old letter from the cavern floor and handed it off to me. I stuffed it in my purse to look at in a bit.

At last, a clue on where to go next. If this is the elf responsible for the Black Mountain Clan's banishment than surely he will know where I can find them. "Where can I find this M'in Gorad?"

"I'm unsure. The entire situation reeks of deception. I would tell you to seek him in Qintarra, but I don't even know if the delegation was

sent from there or not. Regardless, you may want to begin your search there... the Silver Lady might know of this Min Gorad."

My travels have taken me everywhere so far, I don't suppose I'll complain if they take me to the home of the elves next. "And where is Qintarra? The Glimmering Forest is awfully large."

He frowned, "I don't know, unfortunately. The location of Qintarra is a well-guarded secret. But I do know it lies within the Glimmering Forest. The small town of Stillwater lies near the edge of that forest. Perhaps there you might find someone who knows where it is... here, I'll mark your map with Stillwater's location." I held out my map to him and he placed a dot towards the North end of the Stonewall Mountains.

Stillwater... I suppose it's time at last for us to meet, Joachim. "Thank you, Loghaire. I will do my best to find out the truth." I turned to leave, finally having a direction to head in that might yield some answers.

"Wait! I'm much to blame for this situation... my fear and cowardice have helped in bringing about this tragedy. I feel I must do something to help you. Please, take Harrow, the first axe of my family. Its blade strikes true and deep in the hands of the righteous, especially if those hands are dwarven. Within it is the strength of the Thunder-Stones... I give it to you."

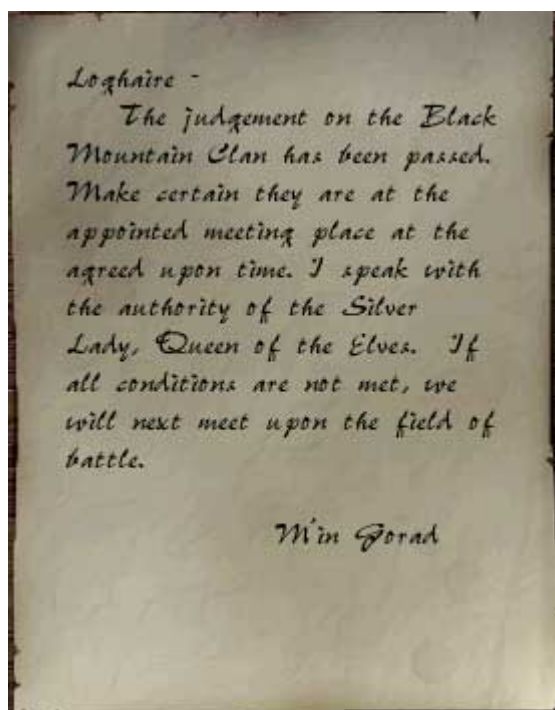
I didn't particularly want to take such an important artifact from Loghaire, but I also felt it would be rude to refuse. "Thank you. I will put it to good use."

He smiled again, "I'm sure you will. Godspeed on your quest, my friend. And... if you do find out what happened to the Black Mountain Clan, return to me. I would be VERY interested in finding out what really happened to them. VERY interested..."

I nodded, "I'll do that. Goodbye, Loghaire."

"Goodbye, friend." He shook my hand firmly and proudly, and then walked off to the passageway I entered from. I was sure Randver would be quite pleasantly surprised to see him. Curious, I took the note he'd handed me out of my purse and read it in the light of the

fire.



Something tells me that my answers aren't going to be found quite so easily. This M'in Gorad is not like any elf I've ever heard of. Elves do not make threats like this..."

Chapter the Thirty Sixth: At Long Last, Nothing

As I stuffed the note back down into my purse it occurred to me that this side of the Dredge didn't have any guards preventing me from going inside. *It's kind of like I have permission. I don't think Loghaire would deny me if I asked...* There was a second exit from Loghaire's room and I decided to explore it.

Loghaire's been busy, I see. There were nearly a dozen corpses littering the ground just outside of the exit. It seemed as though Harrow had served the dwarf well in defending his little hole. I carefully picked my way through them and continued to explore further into the Dredge.

At first I only encountered mere spiders. They were small and numerous, and their bites burned quite badly when they got close enough to strike, but they were truly unimpressive as opponents. I was hoping to discover more interesting and dangerous beasts, the kind I would be proud to tell Frederick about when I finally returned home. After squashing a few more pesky spiders I rounded the next corner.

Unfortunately for me, there were only more and more spiders. They were growing bigger, that much was true, but they still went down easily enough from a good chopping. *This is pathetic. Perhaps I can find Vegard's heirloom and get the hell out of here.*

As I turned the next corner I was set upon by an overgrown, vicious monkey. It reminded me quite a bit of the sorcerous beast I'd fought on the Isle of Despair and I squared off against it in much the same manner. This beast was no friend to magick, however, and it was quite weak by comparison. I'd even emerged victorious against the

sorcerous beast, and accordingly this monkey offered no significant challenge. Virgil seemed quite impressed at my willingness to continue onward, and my ability to take care of myself.

"You're getting quite good at this, madam. I'm almost beginning to wonder why you keep me around at all." He sounded a little down.

"That's nonsense, Virgil, and you know it. I would never get rid of you. We're friends, aren't we? We'll see this thing through to the end, together." I was still exploring further in the Dredge as I chatted with him, not really wanting to stay any longer than I already had.

He sighed, his voice becoming distant, "I suppose that's true. I would be lying if I said I wasn't looking forward to finally meeting back up with Joachim. I truly hope he can give us some guidance."

"I'll meet with him, Virgil. I promise you." I tried to smile at him reassuringly, but he only looked away. *Perhaps when this is all done we'll sit down and share our life stories with each other over a warm cup of tea. I'd love to hear what you have to say, and I wouldn't mind telling you my story in return.*

As I progressed further and further into the Dredge the beasts at last grew more fearsome. I started to encounter vicious wolves roaming in packs, leaping at me with much fervor as soon as they smelled the unfamiliar scent. As ferocious as they were, they were no match for Terry. That dog was by far the most brutish, vicious beast I ever laid eyes on... yet when it came to me, he was as sweet as ever. It was kind of horrifying, really. I tossed him another piece of jerky in thanks for his tireless defense.

Good god, what the hell are those?! If the wolves hadn't been bad enough I seemed to come face to face with lycanthropes. I didn't even know what the hell to make of them, but I didn't really have much time to consider it. They charged me as a pair, intelligently attacking me on either side. I slipped out from between them and heard them snarling behind me, but I didn't slow down to see how they reacted. Turning around agilely, I sunk my axe into the back of one of them and then ripped it free as I heaved the weight of my body against the

wall.

Using the wall as a launching point I kicked away and dove straight at the lycanthropic creature. It had scarcely had time to even notice where I'd gone and I was already upon it once again, the force of my axe literally cleaving its torso in two. It whined and growled for only a second before its life fell abruptly short. The other creature was on me in an instant, seeking revenge for its fallen companion.

I shoved the handle of my axe into its gaping maw, preventing its mouth from shutting. It grabbed ahold of the axe handle and shoved me back against the wall, trying to free its maw from the obstruction. Vollinger's gun rang out and the creature howled in pain, spittle splattering against the side of my face. I could see a trickle of blood start leaking out from its side. Terry leapt at it, clamping onto its right arm and gnawing at it fiercely. It let go of my axe and tried to shake Terry off, but once that bugger had latched onto something there was no getting rid of him. In moments the creature's arm had been gnawed through and it dropped to the ground along with Terry.

It was screeching now, in unbearable pain. Its remaining arm flailed wildly as it stumbled backwards. I pulled my axe free from its maw and swung it in a wide arc, putting the creature out of its misery in one last strike. What remained of the creature fell to the ground alongside its companion, both of them now unmoving. I took only a few moments to regain my composure before continuing onward. *Now THAT is a story Frederick will enjoy hearing about.*

Bloody hell If the two I'd just fought weren't enough I rather suddenly came face to face with an entire pack of them. Several of them seemed to be more spectral than the others and I wondered if there were a magick user in the bunch. My eyes settled upon a single lycanthrope in the back, its fur such a dark shade of gray that it was almost black. It scratched at the wall and howled deafeningly loud, then the rest of the beasts attacked. *That one. I've got to focus my assault on that one.*

I dodged underneath a nigh endless procession of claws and teeth, occasionally feeling them rake apart my armor and eventually my

flesh. I could hear Virgil screaming at them, slicing away with every last bit of strength he had. Terry was hardly still, either, and it would've been impossible not to hear Vollinger's support in such confined quarters. For the most part the remaining beasts ignored me as I passed, turning instead to focus on the more immediate danger. *You're fools to underestimate me.*

My axe came in low when I reached the leader of the lycanthropes, catching him sharply in the ankle. His companions turned when he howled out, suddenly realizing their mistake. It was too late for him, however, and also too late for them. The moment their attention was diverted Vollinger took the opening and blasted one of their heads clear off. Terry continued his gruesome work, as well, and Virgil worked on diverting their attention back towards him.

I slipped between the massive lycanthrope's legs and his claws sunk into the ground where I'd just been. I stopped suddenly on the other side of him and swung the axe high overhead. I swung it so high that bits of rock and dust crumbled downwards from where the very tip of my axe had brushed against the cavern ceiling. The axe came down hard upon the lycanthrope's back, immediately severing the creature's spine. It tried desperately to howl, but only a hoarse whine came out. My next strike landed in-between his eyes and there was no chance that he'd survived. I looked up at my companions and noticed that they'd managed to fend off the rest of the pack without me. I could tell that Terry especially had done a considerable amount of damage in a rather short time period.

I wiped the sweat off my brow and leaned against the wall, catching my breath, "I swear, one of these days I'm going to have to learn that when somebody says a place is dangerous and I ought not go there... it's dangerous and I ought not go there."

Virgil chuckled half-heartedly and Vollinger wiped off the muzzle of his gun, "Now where would the fun be in that?"

I laughed along with the other two, "I suppose you may be right. I haven't died yet, even if I'm quite certain that one of these days I'm going to." All of us laughed then, though it was at least partially because we were so relieved at having survived our most recent

struggle. *Nobody mentioned a damned pack of lycanthropes.* "Come on, let's get going and find Vegard's heirloom."

In searching further throughout the caverns I was unfortunate enough to encounter an entire family of those awful golems that I'd fought back in the Black Mountain Clan mines. The smaller ones were mostly harmless, but there was a great big one that was far worse than any I'd encountered previously. *What the hell are these things? The deceased spirits of harvested ore?*

Luckily the massive stone giant was even slower than the previous ones I'd encountered. I supposed the logic did follow properly. Virgil rightfully kept his distance and I danced circles around the damned thing. It tried desperately to strike at me, its fists crashing into the surrounding walls and metal support structures. I was more afraid that it was going to bring the room down upon my head than I was of it actually striking me. I chipped away at its arms with my axe, eventually severing them so that it stood no further chance of demolishing the room and killing us all. It turned and charged at me angrily, but I dodged out of the way at the last second. It crashed into the wall and shattered into a thousand pieces, unceremoniously collapsing onto the ground.

After that, I seemed to draw closer and closer to the surface of the Dredge. I'd entered it from quite a deep point, so I'd covered quite a bit of ground. The creatures became considerably less threatening and were barely of any consequence at all. They were certainly nothing a little healing salve couldn't patch up in a real hurry.

Cleaving my way through several dozen rats eventually brought me to exactly what I'd been searching for. There was a medium sized room on the other side of tightly locked bars and inside of it I could see a chest made out of blackened metal. I slipped my lockpick into the lock and expertly slid it open with a click. Pushing the gates open I marched into the room and popped open the chest, but after all I'd been through nothing could've prepared me for what I found inside.

A bloody toy train?! He sent me into the depths of the Dredge for a lousy toy train?! Something is wrong with that dwarf! Virgil gazed at it and

then at me, finally commenting, "Not, uh... exactly what you were expecting, is it?"

"You're damned right it's not." I fumed. "Pah. Let's get the bloody hell out of here."

He agreed and I marched off towards the entrance. It turned out that the room that he'd claimed was so deep in the Dredge was actually right at the bloody entrance to the place. I couldn't have gone down more than three short passageways before I found myself at the real entrance to the Dredge, emerging from it behind two very confused guards. "Pardon me," I blushed a little as I pushed past them and out into the Wheel Clan caverns.

I marched straight over to Vegard's room and held his toy train out to him. "I found your... uh... 'heirloom'. Here."

"Really? I commend you and your bravery... the Dredge is no place for the weak of heart. Thank you so much for returning this to me... here is the helmet I promised you..."

I took the helmet from him and shoved it into my purse. "It wasn't particularly deep in. The Dredge goes on much, much farther." I sighed. "No offense, but the whole affair baffles me. Why the toy wagon?"

He actually laughed quite heartily and I felt like I was the butt end of a particularly cruel joke. "Yes, I suppose I could have told you what you were looking for. This wagon has been in my family for 1000 years... legend says it was the first thing ever made by my great-grandfather, when he was but a child."

Although I was starting to see his point, in my anger I could only protest. "Yes, but all the danger... and you've waited so long... for a toy..."

He smiles warmly.

"Is it so hard to believe? Were you expecting some ancient dwarven artifact, perhaps some lost piece of technology?"

He laughs.

"In this world of magick and myth, is it impossible that something as simple as a toy wagon might have value? A valuable lesson, friend... oftentimes you find power in the most insignificant things. Good day

to you..."

I shook my head, trying to clear the angry fog that clouded my mind. "Goodbye, Vegard. I'm sorry if I've offended you."

Virgil nudged me in the stomach as we left. "Come on, it's not so bad, is it? At least he's happy."

I sighed, "It makes for a pretty poor story, but you're right. I got the helmet, and he got the heirloom he was looking for."

Vollinger scratched his beard thoughtfully, "I don't know if I'd quite say that, Samantha. I think the fact that it was a toy wagon only makes it a better story."

I stopped and looked at him and then, finally, burst out laughing. "You're right, of course. I suppose it is far more interesting that way, isn't it?" *Oh, Frederick, the stories I'm going to have to share with you when this is all over...* "All right, let's get a move on. I believe we were headed to Stillwater, were we not?"



Virgil smiled, "Yes... I would like that."

I picked up the pace, "Come on, then! No sense wasting time! It's hardly a week's journey away. All right, maybe a week and a half. Let's go!" The others could only sigh and then struggle to catch up. Of course, I didn't keep that pace up for long, but my little stunt did well to get us all moving.

Stillwater itself was a cold and unpleasant town. Where there wasn't dirt there was snow and ice hung from the rooftops of every building in sight. If that weren't enough, the damned place was even more spread out than Shrouded Hills. It had less than a twentieth of the

places to visit than Tarant or Caladon had and it was almost half the size. My first order of business was to visit the inn, which I knew Virgil had been waiting for.

I approached the kindly old innkeeper politely, "Excuse me, my friend Virgil and I have just arrived in town and we were told to ask you for anything a man named Joachim might have left behind for somebody that fits our description."

"Ah yes! He left some things for you. Now, where did I put them? Oh, yes!"

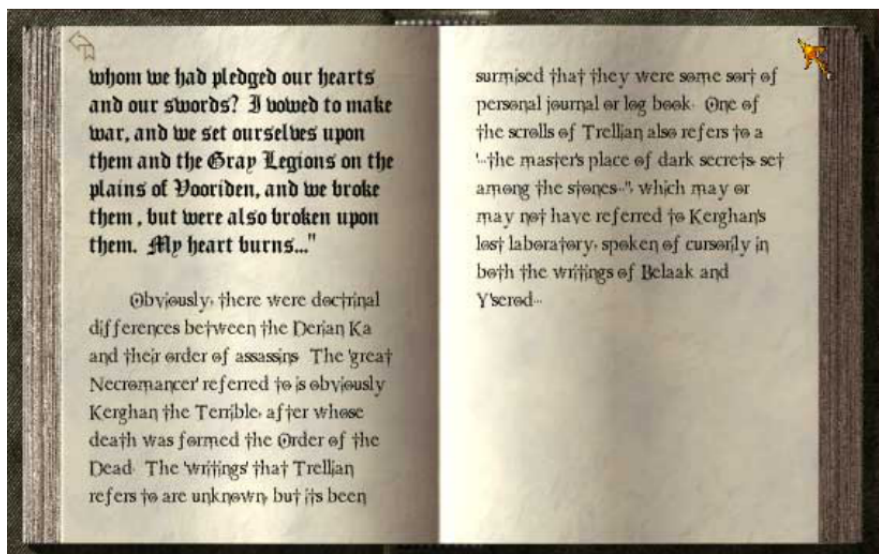
I took the things from him as he handed them to me, "Thank you very much, sir." Not wanting to open them in front of prying eyes I wandered outside where I cracked open the package to find a book.

The men trying to kill
you seem to be the remnants
of the Molechean Hand, who,
long ago, were assassins for
the Order of the Dead
(Derian Kn). I found this
ancient but incomplete text
concerning their history...they
don't seem to be bad fellows,
perhaps just a bit
misdirected. Things are too
dangerous right now...I
shouldn't have even had you
come here. I'll find you.

Joachim.

...lost histories of the Molechean
Hand. Their separation from the
Order of the Dead was always a
mystery, but translations of the Scrolls
of Trellian First Assassin of the Hand
have brought to light their enigmatic
reasons for leaving. A half-torn
excerpt from the fourth scroll reads-

"...And the writings of the
great Necromancer were found by
me, and his madness and
abominations were made clear,
and I threw myself to the ground
with great sorrow and gnashing of
teeth. How evil were the men to



Obviously, there were doctrinal differences between the Derian Ka and their order of assassins. The 'great Necromancer' referred to is obviously Kerghan the Terrible, after whose death was formed the Order of the Dead. The writings that Trellian refers to are unknown, but it's been

surmised that they were some sort of personal journal or log book. One of the scrolls of Trellian also refers to a 'the master's place of dark secrets set among the stones-' which may or may not have referred to Kerghan's lost laboratory, spoken of cursorily in both the writings of Belaak and Y'sered-

I handed the book to Virgil since he was awfully curious about it. I'd truly been expecting to meet up with Joachim in Stillwater, and now that he wasn't present I was unsure of exactly what to do. *I'll find you? That frightens more than comforts me. What kind of man is he really?* I was just heading into the local blacksmith's shop to peruse the Stillwater blades I'd read so much about when Virgil interrupted me.

"Excuse me... that book is interesting, don't you think?! It seems that these Molochean Hand assassins were part of some larger group called the Derian-Ka. What did he call them—the Order of the Dead? Obviously these fellows all had some sort of disagreement..."

"Yes. Joachim thinks perhaps they're not all that evil..." *Hmph, there's that word again... evil. They're not all bad, right? Just a bunch of assassins for hire... trying to kill me for money. No, not bad at all!*

Virgil seemed to agree with me. "Not all that bad! Ha! Obviously Joachim hasn't run into them lately." Virgil and I both started chuckling a bit. "That fellow Trellian did sound like an agreeable sort, though, didn't he? Anyone who chooses to side against something called the Order of the Dead is alright in my book..."

I tilted my head and stared at Virgil curiously, "You mean 'the first ASSASSIN' Trellian?"

Virgil laughs.

"Yes, you've got a point there. I'm sure the man was no saint. Then again, who really is? We've all got a bit of blood on our hands."

I sighed, grasping Virgil's hand. "You and I know a lot about that it seems..."

He pulled away from me, obviously troubled by something. "Yes... I'd never have thought myself worthy of this affair. And I shouldn't be making judgments about anyone's character. I think I'd best just keep my bloody mouth shut."

You're not the only one who's lead a troubled past. "Virgil..."

"Foolish, because I was a coward. Burdens like mine... they don't go away... they always come back to collect what is due them. Someday the balance will have to be paid..."

Oh, Virgil, you can't possibly think you're alone in this. What kind of a friend would I be if I weren't here to help you through it? Instead of actually saying what was on my mind, which might've been comforting, I only pushed Virgil away further. "What are you talking about?" *Stupid... that didn't come out right.*

Virgil shook his head, "No... I shouldn't have said anything about it. As I've said... the past is in the past."

I sighed. *I know you don't really feel that way. Maybe someday you'll trust me enough to tell me, and I won't be so much of an idiot that I'll push you away from it.* "Well, what do you think we should do now?"

Changing the subject seemed prudent.

He seems a bit worried.

"I don't know. I was hoping that Joachim would be here to give us a little guidance. It seems we've been running blind without the reins, doesn't it?"

He shakes his head.

"I guess we should just stick to the task at hand..."

I nodded, "We were doing just fine without Joachim before, so that sounds good to me. Let's get moving."

He smiled, but I could see right through him. His voice was as distant as ever and I could tell he was still thinking about the things he was trying to tell me about. "Yes... the day's not getting any younger."

Virgil... just who do you think you're trying to fool?

Chapter the Thirty Seventh: To Keep Afloat Amidst Still Waters

I hastily glanced over at the blades, not really caring one way or another about them after my chat with Virgil. Despite that I was looking straight at them, I barely even noticed them. I was too preoccupied with my own insecurities to think of anything else. *After all this time, Virgil, you still don't trust me...?* I needed a drink.

I stormed across the snowy courtyard with the ugly statue in it that made up the main square of Stillwater, pushing my way into the bar on the other side. I planned on just storming right up to the bar and ordering myself a whiskey, but I overheard yet another tavern philanthropist gloating after somebody failed to answer his trivia question. *Well, I know just what will wipe the smile off his face.*

"The First Panarii Temple is in...."

I grinned smugly as the man counted out 500 coins to me. Something about thievery, legal or not, always made me feel better for some reason. Since I'd come to the bar to get my mind off of things anyway, I looked about to see if anybody else had any questions they thought unanswerable. Naturally, I was in luck. Stillwater certainly wasn't lacking in fools.

"What happened to the Morbhan Forest?"

Now that's very much to my liking. Thievery was but a fleeting joy, however, and my foul mood strongly persisted. I needed something that would persist along with it. I wandered over to the bar and slapped down four coins, glancing up at the bartender expectantly, "Two shots of whiskey, good sir."

"Coming right up," he said, fetching two clean glasses from the shelf behind him and sliding them onto the bar in front of me. "You new in town? Just passing through?," he questioned as he filled up the shot glasses with that sweet fire I so desperately wanted.

I tossed back the first shot before he'd even finished filling the second. "Something like that, yeah."

"Have you heard about the Stillwater Giant? It's an old legend here in Stillwater. Everyone around here claims to have seen the creature at least once."

I remembered suddenly the vicious and unnecessary murders of H.T. Parnell and Gar, the world's smartest orc. *Just what I needed, even more weighing on my guilty conscience.* I tossed the second shot down. "Bunch of hogwash, nothing more. Lies. Give me another shot."

The bartender acquiesced with my request and I slapped another few coins on the bar. "You're free to believe what you like, madam, but strange things do happen way out here in the middle of nowhere. Take Marley, for example. Nobody used to like him at all, but in no time at all he's become a sought after friend, and lover to the women. Not a week ago nobody would go within ten feet of him unless they needed somebody to spit at! Strange, don't you think?"

I grumbled, setting down my third emptied shot. "What's strange is there's still an empty shot glass on this counter. I've got sorrows to drown, dammit!"

He shook his head at me sadly, pouring my fourth shot. "You think you've got it bad, madam? Have you heard of Adkin Chambers' tragic past? He was crippled by Garrick Stout, blinded for the rest of his days. On top of that the love of his life was stolen from him. Whatever ails you, friend, remember, it could always be worse."

I looked at the shot sitting on the bar and sighed deeply. *Adkin Chambers... right, the dodge master... I was planning on paying him a visit at some point. With or without Virgil, there's still too much to be done to waste away in a backwater tavern like this one.* I pushed the shot away, "My sorrows are my own, and they aren't yours to judge... but drinking myself into a hole isn't going to solve anything. Take that shot for yourself, my good man, and please tell me what you can about any elves in these parts."

"We don't have many elves here in Stillwater, but there's one named Myrth who lives here in town. Fairly strange fellow, actually..."

"Thanks for the tip, friend. I'll go searching him out." I dropped

another few coins on the bar and pushed my way out grumpily.

"Excuse me," Virgil said as I stalked away from him. I stopped. "Are you alright? You don't seem yourself... to be honest, I'm worried."

I couldn't hold onto it any longer. It was perhaps some combination of my foul mood and the whiskey that was rapidly impairing my judgment, but I'd been carrying around my burden for too long, and the weight of it was too much to bear. I'd desperately wanted to swap stories with Virgil, but he didn't trust me enough to tell me even the first thing he was hiding. "Do you remember when we first met, Virgil?" His trust didn't even matter anymore, what I needed to say was for my benefit and mine alone. I just wanted somebody to understand me, to reassure me that they, too, were every bit as horrible as I.

Virgil seemed suddenly nervous, "Y-yes..." He looked confused and even more worried than ever, having no idea of what I was trying to say. *Don't we just make a darling couple of friends? You don't trust me, and I'm using you to feel better about myself. The sad part is I really do consider you a friend, one of the best I've ever had.*

"I ran away, Virgil... that's why I was on that zeppelin. I picked up everything in my house that wasn't nailed down and I sold it all for a zeppelin ticket and this dress that I've long since ruined. I didn't live alone, and the things I sold... they didn't belong to me." Everytime I paused for even a fraction of a second he opened his mouth to try and say something. When I finally paused to take a deep breath he cut in.

"That's it? That's what you're worried about?" He sounded almost happy, like he was about to laugh. "Samantha, please... that's nothing... so what? Nobody's a saint. I'm sure your roommates or your family or whoever it was has long since forgiven you. If anything they're probably worried, waiting for you to come home to them."

I wanted to cry, and I was such a wreck that I almost gave in. I let out a few sniffles, but nothing that I couldn't write off as a symptom of standing out in the snow. "You're wrong, Virgil. That was just the

tip of the iceberg. I did something horrible, something I couldn't stand to live with. Then, instead of facing it, I ran, and I didn't care who I hurt in the process. All I could think about was getting away."

Virgil stared down at the ground, his voice barely above a whisper. "We all have our burdens, I suppose. I wouldn't presume to say yours is any easier to live with than mine, but listen... forget about all that, please. Who you once were doesn't matter, because you're somebody else now. You're an adventurer, traveling the world, chasing down mysteries... you're my friend, and together we've helped a lot of people. Doesn't any of that count for something?"

I couldn't hold the tears back any more. I wanted to believe in what Virgil was saying, but I knew better. "I wish any of it did count, Virgil, but everything I do now is based on the destruction of the person I once was. None of the things we've done together, good or bad, would have happened if I'd never ruined my life in the first place. We've a lot in common, you and I, so tell me this one thing: if you could take back the one thing you regret most in your past, would you do it... knowing that it would undo everything good you've done since that point?"

Virgil fell completely silent for several moments, obviously giving a lot of thought to what I'd just said. If it weren't for the whiskey I probably never would've said anything at all, knowing the pain it was causing him, the same pain that I'd been trying to ignore since we first reached Tarant. At last, he spoke, "Randver was right about you... you've a wisdom beyond your years, it seems. You know that I would, and in saying that I know that you would as well. I can understand how you feel. Is... is that all? Can we move on now? I don't think I really want to dwell on this any longer."

I reached over to Virgil and I gave him a hug, although it was cold and distant through the plate mail. "Yes, you're right, Virgil. I suppose that dwelling on it doesn't really stop assassins from chasing us down, now does it? Come on, let's take a look around Stillwater and take some time to calm down, then seek out this Myrth fellow."

He sighed, patting me on the shoulder with a metal glove, "Yes, that sounds like a good idea."

The first place we stopped was back into the blacksmith's shop that we'd left not too long ago. The shopkeeper called out a greeting as we entered.

"Hello. I am Richard Leeks, bladesmith of Stillwater. How might I be of service?"

"Greetings, Richard." I glanced around the shop, gently itching at my forearms. "I've heard a bit about Stillwater blades before, but never had the opportunity to actually see them. Would you mind telling me what's so special about them?"

He picked up a blade off of a nearby counter and stared at it, running his finger along the flat of it as he spoke. "We do a lot of trading with the dwarves... they have the best ore in Arcanum, and it makes well-balanced weapons. My family has been making swords in Stillwater for 400 years. I don't mean to be wordy, lass, but if there's anyone in this land who knows more about bladesmithing than I do, I'd be very surprised..."

I could tell that the blade he was holding wouldn't be particularly agreeable to me. "Do you enchant the weapons as well?" A smith who enchanted his own wares would be a rarity indeed.

"No... there's a local wizard in these parts who I use to enchant the weapons... he's a stubborn old codger, but we get along pretty well. Goes by the name of Cyrus. He puts spells on my weapons, and I check in on him from time to time to do some work around his place when he needs it. Come to think of it... what day is it...?"

I noted the look of concern on in Richard's eyes and started to become a lot more interested. "I believe it's Tuesday, my good man. Is there a problem?"

He nodded slowly, setting the blade down and scratching the top of his bald head. "That's strange... old Cyrus was supposed to come down here yesterday. I haven't had the time to check in on him, and today I'm especially busy with an order from the Caladonian Guard. I sure hope he's alright..."

Although I was interested in more details on his order for Caladon I also wasn't in the mood to think about my former home at just that moment. "Perhaps I could look in on him, for you..." I was mostly

interested in any kind of compensation he could offer me for my time, but I also had some genuine desire to help. After all, if something happened to the old wizard then Caladon's newly purchased blades wouldn't be enchanted at all. If nothing else, I was helping my hometown in a rather roundabout way.

"Hmmm. Yes, you seem a trustworthy type. Would you mind making sure that no harm has come to him? And when you talk with him, tell him I'll be needing his services as soon as possible... this shipment has to go out by the end of the week. If you do this, I think I could find an extra Stillwater Blade to pass your way. What say you, friend?"

Why do people always say I seem trustworthy? Are they just that daft or am I a better liar than I give myself credit for? There wasn't an easy way to say 'your store makes me itch' so I just accepted. "Sounds like a fair trade, I'll do it." I could always sell the blade off afterwards.

He sighed an obvious sigh of relief. It seemed that he had an awful lot of faith in my abilities. "My thanks to you, stranger. His house is just northwest of here... just follow the path outside of town. When you've made sure the old wizard is fine, then return to me."

"I'll do just that, Richard. Until then." I waved at him and stepped out of the shop, traveling in a northwesterly direction. After walking for only a couple short minutes I encountered what I assumed to be the house. At the very least there weren't any other houses I'd encountered along the way, but such was the nature of Stillwater.

Although the air was cold and my nose was chilled to the point of being barely functional, I could never mistake the scent of blood.

The doors to the house were flung wide open and there was blood on the edge of the door frame, running down the length of it and making a thin pool at the bottom. The inside of the house looked to be in rather extreme disrepair as well. Magickal trinkets and other such oddities had been scattered about the table and floor haphazardly. There was a chair in the middle of the room that had been knocked over and one of the legs was broken off. *This is not a good sign at all.*

"Beg your pardon," Vollinger called out to me from outside the house. I wandered over to him and he pointed at the snow on the ground.

"Take a look... those are tracks, larger than the ones even Virgil is making in that suit of armor he's wearing. If I were to guess, you didn't find a body inside the house, did you?"

I shook my head no, "What are you thinking, Vollinger? Should we follow them?"

He thought about it for a bit, bending down and tracing the outline of one of the tracks with his finger. "At first I'd suspected these might belong to a half ogre, but actually they're a bit large even for that. If I were of a mind to believe in legends and folktales I might suggest that the old wizard has been abducted by the stillwater giant."

I tapped my foot impatiently, starting to get cold from standing outside in the wind. "...but you're not the type to believe in legends or folktales, and neither am I. So what made these tracks, really?"

"Probably an ogre. Powerful beasts, but stupid. Nothing we couldn't handle, if it's not already too late. The wizard went missing yesterday already and ogres are not known for their patience."

"Well, if it's something you think we can handle then let's go. Even if it's too late for old Cyrus we can't let this ogre continue to abduct people." I followed the tracks as they twisted and wound around the nearby mountains, occasionally turning back on themselves. Eventually they ended at the entrance to a smallish cave carved out of the mountainside. I cautiously stepped inside.

It wasn't a large cave by any stretch of the imagination, though it was somewhat tall and it did widen out towards its end. As it widened I took notice of a crude jail cell that had been made by jamming heavy iron bars in-between the walls of a small cave-in. Behind the bars, trapped inside of that little room, I saw a gnome wearing a garish robe. Thankfully he was still alive. "Help! Get me out of here!" He was shouting loudly, his voice echoing off of the cavern walls. "That old ogre has got it in his mind to eat me!"

I fumbled with the lock on the door, having a hard time fitting my pick into the damaged device. "Cyrus, I presume? Richard Leeks sent me to find you..."

"Richard! Bless that man... I'll enchant everything that man owns if you get me out of here! I was captured by Drog Black-Tooth, an old ogre that's lived in these parts for years. He's never bothered me before, but I guess he got hungry. He said he was going out for something to spice up the soup! Please! Get me out of here!" I fumbled at the lock with my pick some more, unaccustomed to locks of such heavy yet poor construction. "I'll do my best... give me a moment here..." Just then I heard a series of loud, rhythmic thumps from behind me.

I turned just in time to see a massive ogre lumbering directly towards me. *Damnation! No time to even hide!* I pulled out my axe and ran straight for him, hoping he wouldn't expect me to be so bold. He swung a massive hamfist at me, but I held up my axe and parried his attack. I could hear the sizzle as his flesh contacted the scalding hot blade. The ogre let out a roar, pulling his fist back all too suddenly, leaving behind several layers of skin that had instantly cooked and stuck to the blade. His knuckles began to bleed heavily.

Vollinger fired off a shot, penetrating the beast's shoulder with great force. The ogre lumbered backwards, knocked briefly off balance, and I sprang into action. I darted behind the ogre faster than he could turn his neck to follow my movements and I sunk my axe into the unprotected backside of his knee. He howled yet again as his knee exploded outwards, sending him tumbling face-first into the ground. I finished him off quickly, then, not wanting even a lowly beast such as he to suffer any more than he had to.

I turned back to the crude jail cell and, taking my time, finally forced the lock open with my pick.

"Thank the stars! It was going to be wizard stew for old Drog if you hadn't come along! I'm going to run back to town! Good day to you, madam!"

I'm not the stars, but I'll accept your thanks anyway. "Alright. Good day to you Cyrus..." I half smiled at him as he ran out of the cavern so fast he nearly tripped over his own robe. I shook my head, shrugging at the other two, and began heading towards the cave entrance myself. Cyrus had been saved and the ogre threat was eliminated, so I returned to Richard to tell him of what had transpired.

"Greetings, Richard," he spotted the fresh blood stain on my dress and started to look very worried. "I found Cyrus. He'd been waylaid by some old ogre who thought he looked like a fine meal. He's fine, though, and that old ogre won't be bothering Stillwater any longer." "Really? You must mean old Drog Black-Tooth... he's been living up in the hills for a long time, but most of the time he's all teeth but no bite. Looks like his stomach got the best of him this time. Well done, friend. Here's the blade I promised you."

He hands it to me.

"Good day to you."

I glanced at him thoughtfully for a moment, reaching out and carefully taking the blade. Even simply holding it made me itch terribly. "Say, Richard, I've recently come into the possession of a rather fine Stillwater blade. I'd say it's at least as good as the others you've got here for sale in your shop. Would you perhaps be interested in buying it?"

He glanced at me confused for several moments before finally slapping his knee and laughing whole-heartedly. "If you'd wanted money, stranger, you should've just said so. Sure, I'll take that blade back and give you some coin instead."

"Much obliged, Richard. It was nice doing business with you." I took the coin from him and finally headed out the door. I quickly stopped into the General Store next to pick up some more jerky for Terry. I tossed a piece to him, which he devoured hungrily, then set about my search for Myrth. "Terry, old boy... do you think you can find me an elf? There's only one around here." He woofed gently, sniffing at the ground and walking along slowly as he sniffed more.

Eventually he came to a stop in front of another house and looked up at me expectantly. I dropped him another piece of jerky and knocked on the door. Somewhat to my surprise the door was not answered by an elf, but instead it was a little halfling. I sighed and glanced down at him, "I don't suppose your name is Myrth, is it?"

He looked confused, and laughed a bit nervously. "No... I'm Gildor Nightwalk. Myrth is to the northeast, not far from here."

I sighed again, glancing down at Terry as he continued devouring his jerky. "Thanks, Gildor."

He paused for just a moment before closing the door, then stopped with it partway closed and called out to me again, "Say, madam, if you're looking for Myrth... you wouldn't happen to be headed to the Glimmering Forest, would you?"

I stopped, glancing at him curiously. "Yes, actually, my travels do take me in that direction. Do you have some work that needs doing?" He looks me over thoroughly, assessing my capabilities.

"Well, I do not think you are up to the task I would have you do. It's no simple task, and will require great skill to complete. You do not have the look of a thief about you."

The best part about being a thief is having others look at me and tell me that I do not look like a thief. "Perhaps I am more stealthy than I appear, Gildor..."

The halfling gave it some thought and finally spoke again. "I am going to tell you a story. The tale will give you a greater insight into the task you are going to attempt. So please, be patient and listen.

"As a youth I was pressed into service by a group of travelers. They were a rowdy, barbarous lot seeking to gain great wealth and reputation while adventuring throughout the land. I found my place among them, for at times stealth was called for and this was my greatest ability. As time progressed, I proved to them that I was no mere impressed servant, and became a valued member of the group. We adventured together for several years, following old tales and discovering lost treasures. It was a rich and wild time in my life..."

He paused for several moments, completely lost in his memories. After a heavy silence he snapped out of it and continued his story. "One fateful day, we were lazing about recovering from our last adventure. We had just cleared out a cavern full of lizard men that had been terrorizing the local community. Deep in the back of the cave we discovered an iron-locked chest, sealed tight. When we collected our fee from the local magistrate, we conveniently failed to mention the chest."

I started chuckling and I gently slapped him on the shoulder, "Not

exactly on the up and up, eh?"

He looked annoyed, "Shh! Do you want me to tell the story or not?"

Inwardly, I was rolling my eyes at his presumed self-importance. "Sorry. Please, continue."

After taking a deep breath the halfling continued his story. "It took Nightfire, a half-breed elven member of the troupe, nearly two days to spring the lock and open the chest. Since Nightfire was an expert with a lock, there was much anticipation and speculation done over the supposed contents of the box.

"Inside the chest, we were disappointed to find only a few coins, several interesting baubles, and a book. As I was the only literate member, I was given the book to review. Here..." he handed me a worn old journal. "I still have the book, why don't you read it for yourself. Tell me when you have finished and I will continue."

One of my sons, Kallon, had wandered off into the woods to play. I set out to find him, as he had been gone most of the day. He was often one to wander, but not normally for this length of time.

I tracked him deep into the woods, farther than I, or anyone I know, had ever ventured before. As I moved deeper into the unknown, I came to an area where the hairs at the base of my neck

began to stand on end. The air seemed to cool, and the sounds of the forest ceased to exist. Yet Kallon's tracks continued, so I pressed onward, calling out to him.

And then I saw it. A clearing, silent and haunted. Scattered throughout the clearing were several large stones, positioned as if to have meaning. I believe they had arcane writings carved upon them, but could not discern them from my distance.

In the center of these stones stood an altar, and upon that altar was the largest ruby I had ever beheld.

It was several moments before I could take my eyes from it, so mesmerizing was the jewel. It was then that I noticed Kallon, not far off to the side. As I watched, he began to run towards the altar, it appeared he was intent on gaining the ruby.

I shouted for him to wait, but he paid me no heed. Before I could stop him, Kallon passed by the first marked stone. As he did so, a most unnatural beast burst forth from the ground. He cried out in terror, and turned to flee, but the horror was upon him. The beast killed him before he had even taken a step back toward me, a look of absolute terror frozen to his face.

I stood powerless, frozen in fear at the apparition and macabre scene before me. Oh horror! I dared not move toward the beast. Instead, I ran from that most accursed place as fast as my feet would carry me. I was forced to leave my precious Kallon where he lie, for I never found the courage to return.

I warned the surrounding farmers of the horror in the woods. All children were forbidden from venturing far from home from that day forward. I can only pray that the beasts are tied to that wicked place, and will never be let loose upon us.

It has been years since that dreadful day. Many have forgotten what happened that day in the woods. Yet I still mourn the loss of my beloved Kallon and have never been able to remove the vision of that hideous creature from my mind. To this day it haunts my sleep.

I am old and soon shall die. I leave this record as warning to anyone who might venture deep into the haunted woods. Beware! Let no other souls be consumed by the beast of the jewel!

Tannon Wroughtbringer

I handed the journal back to Gildor and stared at him expectantly. "Ahem. Yes... where was I? Oh, yes, I had just finished reading the book... we quickly reviewed the map drawn inside to determine our distance from the ruby. It was several days' travel from our encampment. Fools that we were, we pulled out at daybreak in search of the gem."

"As we neared the locale, it was as the letter described. The hairs on our necks raised and the forest sounds ceased. You could feel the apprehension in the air... Then we came upon the clearing... and the ruby. It was amazing. Never have I beheld a more beautiful thing. We

were all mesmerized, dreaming of the pleasure we could enjoy once in possession of such treasure.

"Two of our troop suddenly ran forward to grab the jewel, and all others save me followed. For I never join in battle, my strength not lying in combat. 'Wait!' I hollered. 'Remember the beast!' But it was too late. As the two men passed the first stone, a hideous creature emerged from the depths. My comrades drew their weapons, but they were clearly outmatched.

"In horror I stood there! As the fighting moved about, more beasts materialized to join the fray. I counted 7 beasts that dreadful day, one for each of the strange stones that filled the clearing. The death cries of my comrades were quickly silenced. And rather than turning on me, as I feared they would, the creatures disappeared back into the depths as the last body fell.

"Cautiously, I approached the stones, yet dared not pass their mark. As I observed the morbid scene that lay before me, I noticed that there was a warning carved upon each stone. It read, 'The Great Ruby of K'alru is found. Heed this warning ere you move around. He who walks without a sound shall pass the death beneath the ground.'"

I nodded understandingly, "If only they had read the stones..."

"A sickness grew in me, for I knew had my comrades only waited, they would still be alive, for I had the skill necessary to obtain the ruby. But in the aftermath, as terror shook my bones, I was shaken from what I had witnessed and lacked the confidence to complete the task."

"...and so you left." I said the words heavily and sympathetically. In truth I didn't particularly care for the halfling's plight, it being a seemingly fitting punishment for excessive greed, but I knew that one day I would suffer a similar punishment.

Gildor looked almost ready to weep, and his voice was terribly strained. "I fled from the scene of the carnage. I wandered aimlessly for a time, before making Stillwater my home. I have never left again. I fear my adventuring days have come to an end. Yet, as the author of the journal says, the jewel and the beasts still haunt my sleep."

Thinking forward to the task that the halfling had in mind I asked, "So you did not retrieve the ruby?"

"I never did. Yet I still desire the Great Ruby of K'al-nu. As you have probably surmised, I want you to retrieve the jewel for me. If you can do this deed, I will pay you a large sum of coin, but I believe the risk demands such a price. What say you?! Will you do this task for me?"

For 1500 coin I'd retrieve your mother's corpse from a thrice-cursed mausoleum. "I will retrieve it for you, Gildor!"

He smiled, his voice gaining back some of its strength as his mood improved. "Here, I will mark the location of the glade on your map." He dotted a location on the Northern side of the Grey Mountains, far east of the Glimmering Forest.

"Thank you, Gildor. It will take some time for me to travel that distance, but I will return when I have the ruby. I bid you good day." Turning, I tucked the map back into my purse and started towards a nearby house to the north. I glanced over at Terry curiously, wondering just how much of what I said he really understood. He sure knew how to get me to give him more jerky, though.

Reaching the house I was headed towards, I knocked on the door. It was answered moments later by a spindly looking elf. *I finally found you.* The elf looked severely annoyed. "What? What is it?"

Bloody hell can elves ever be annoying when they want to be. "I'm looking for the city of Qintarra. It's quite important."

He stared at me, repeating my question back, "Qintarra? You seek Qintarra?"

I nodded very intentionally slowly. "Yes, that's what I said. Do you know where it is?"

"It's in the forest. Even a fool knows that."

I started to growl and curse under my breath. *Is this some kind of bloody game to you? Do you enjoy lording your knowledge over outsiders?*

"I realize it's in the forest..." my patience was wearing thin.

I saw the blasted elf start actually smirking, no longer able to hold

himself back. He really did think his little game was funny. "Then why are you asking me where it is?"

That's it. Out with it already! "Do you know where Quintarra is located or not?"

"Yes."

I can't tell you how badly I want to stab you! "Out with it, man!"

He tried to hold back his laughter, mostly unsuccessfully. "In the Glimmering Forest."

"Yes. I bloody know it's in the blasted forest already, we've been over this. Look, this isn't funny. Where, exactly, in the forest is Quintarra?"

"In the trees."

Cracking a slight smile.

"IN WHAT TREES?!" I shouted at him impatiently. Virgil placed a hand reassuringly on my shoulder, trying to calm me down. I took a deep sigh.

"The trees in the forest." the elf said, full out laughing now.

I stared him straight in the eyes. "Please. As I said, it's urgent that I find Quintarra."

He sighed, his little game finally starting to wear thin even to him.

"Why is it so important that you find Quintarra, if you don't mind me asking?"

I narrowed my eyes at him, still silently seething. "No, I don't mind at all that you ask."

He stared back at me for several moments, looking more and more puzzled. "So? ...Why is it so important?" I merely stared at him. He started looking rather grumpy and began tapping his foot. "Well...?" "Well, are you going to tell me or not?"

Finally it was my turn to look at him with a stupid smirk on my face. "I said I didn't mind you asking, not that I'd tell you." *Whether you tell me where the damned city is or not, at least I bloody got you back.*

Although it surprised me somewhat, the damned elf actually started laughing. "Ha! Very good! A woman after my own heart!" He laughed some more. "Qintarra... yes, I know where it is."

Not this again... please, anything else. "Can you tell me where it is located?"

"Hmmm. Elves just don't go repeating that information at the drop of a hat... BUT I can sympathize with your plight. I'll show you where Qintarra lies... but you first must prove your worth."

On second thought, I think I preferred the word games. "And how would I go about doing that?"

He smirked slightly and I could feel another horrible game coming on. He turned his head up slightly, staring down at me. "I'm not quite sure you'd be up to the task... this is a rite of passage for young elves - a cultural tradition. Very old, and VERY difficult."

As if I've got a bloody choice, you bastard. "I can do it. Just tell me what I need to do." My words couldn't have been any more annoyed sounding if I'd actually tried.

"You must bring me the pelt of the mystical Stillwater Giant. Only then will I entrust you with the location of the mother city."

A plan was already starting to formulate in my mind. *Oh this ought to be good... keep talking.* "The Stillwater Giant, eh? What can you tell me of it?"

I could tell easily that he was lying through his teeth. "It is an ancient, mystical creature. From a time before the Age of Legends. A fearsome beast, reputed to have magickal powers."

I almost wanted to see what other hogwash the elf would come up with to try and mislead me. "And where might I find this Stillwater Giant?"

He grinned widely. "I recommend you speak with Stanley Xavier Hippington... he's the local expert on the Stillwater Giant."

"Very well, I shall do so." I curtsied slightly towards the elf and departed. After I'd gotten a good distance from his house I glanced

over at Virgil, "What say we make another run to Tarant so you can stock back up on potions and whatnot. Does that sound good?"

He looked a bit confused. "Uh... certainly. I suppose I am running a bit low."

Once again we journeyed back to Tarant. Virgil restocked as he'd been planning on and then I walked with him over to the abandoned old store that used to be H.T. Parnell's. With Virgil's help I pried the boards loose from in front of the door and snuck into the building. As luck would have it, nobody had bothered to clean out the old place just yet. I crept over to the display case with the obviously fake pelt in it and picked the lock. Taking the pelt off of its cheap, skeletal frame, I folded it up and placed it neatly in my purse.

Having gotten what I came for, I headed straight back to Stillwater. I'd wasted enough time doing random other things and I was quite focused on reaching Qintarra as soon as possible. The journey was long, as usual, but thankfully uneventful. I was growing so accustomed to long journeys that I scarcely even remembered all of the details.

Arriving back in Stillwater, I paid Myrth another visit. He seemed almost surprised to see me. "I've got your pelt, Myrth."

A truly Shocked Expression flashes across his face

"What?"

"The pelt you wanted. Here it is." I handed it to him and he looked over it.

Looking back up at me with a smug grin on his face he said, "Really. And just where did you get it?"

If you think to catch me in a lie you're sorely mistaken. You and I both know there is no Stillwater Giant. "Actually, I stole it from H.T. Parnell's museum in Tarant."

"Ha! Very good! You're a tricky one and you're a good sport as well! You've earned the location of Qintarra. Here, let me show you on your map..."

He shows me two locations on my map.

"...and here's the mountain pass you will need to cross to get there."

"Thank you, Myrth. I can't say it's been a pleasure, but you had your fun and I've got my destination. I'll be going then."

He cackled as I left, and I merely sighed. I looked at Virgil and Vollinger, then pet Terry gently on the head. "Well, it's about time, isn't it? Let's get a move on."

Chapter the Thirty Eighth:

Murder Most Foul

Trudging through the snow in a thin, overly flamboyant, worn-out old dress was certainly not my idea of fun. Virgil chuckled at me near constantly as the damn thing caught on rocks and twigs, or just dragged a good layer of snow with it. I thought more than a few times about changing out of the it, but it was so cold that I didn't want to remove the only clothing I had on in order to put on something warmer. Not to mention the leather coming out of my pack would be absurdly cold by now and I didn't relish the idea of warming it up. The whole thing put me in a rather surly mood.

Even as I was thinking about doing it anyway my eye caught sight of the most peculiar thing. There was a light blue bunny, a sizeable one, hopping his little way through the snow. I'd never seen a blue bunny before, and it seemed odd to find one hopping around amidst the snow. Most bunnies in snowy habitats had white fur. I approached it rather curiously, thankful it was a bunny and not a rat.

As I stepped nearby to it, however, something incredible happened. Its fur rapidly changed to a medium brown hue and antlers the size of my axe sprouted out of its head. It stood up on its back legs, growing upward with astounding speed. Its front legs thickened and stretched out, forming into arms as the legs it stood on raised it higher and higher into the air. At last the horrible beast stared at me, snarling. I knew immediately that I had come face to face with the Stillwater Giant and it was no myth.

It swiped a gnarled claw at me before I could get out of the way, raking clean across my shoulder and chest. Blood began pouring out, staining the dress and the snow beneath me, and still the beast wouldn't relent. Another clawed hand lashed out at me but the pain had brought me to my senses and I was ready for a fight. I deflected

its claw with my shield, letting the force of its strike carry me sideways. My feet quickly adapted to the motion, and I spun around to the creature's side, burying my axe in its hip.

It roared furiously, making a sound so horrendously loud that the ground quaked and the snow shook off of the trees surrounding us. Undaunted, I continued my assault. I cleaved the beast around the knees and, in another series of strikes, lopped one of its antlers off. I danced fully behind the creature as it tried to turn on its wounded knee and I brought my axe down upon the upper half of its spine.

My strike landed at just the right angle to not only shatter the creature's spine instantly, but to fully cleave through bone and flesh. As I followed through with my powerful swing the axe separated a large portion of the giant's torso from the rest of its body in a disgusting spray of crimson. Not even the legendary Stillwater Giant could survive an assault such as that, and the remaining pieces of its body slowly fell to the ground, staining the snow.

I strongly considered skinning the beast and taking its pelt, but alas... I no longer had any use for it. Nevertheless, it seemed a shame to let such a thing go to waste.

I pulled out my trusty old dagger and began the process, as grim as it was. I had more than a little practice with sewing as well, so I was able to patch up the several grievous wounds I had inflicted upon it during our battle. If anything, they lended a peculiar veracity to any tales I might tell in the future about it, unlike the tales told by the late H.T. Parnell. *Frederick's really going to love this pelt, I just know it.*



Although I could've stuffed the pelt into my sizable purse alongside my armor, I decided instead to take my suit of leather out and take

advantage of the warmth that combat had provided me. Virgil and Vollinger averted their eyes while I quickly changed into my leather armor, which was every bit as cold as I'd been expecting it to be. Luckily, my blood was still pumping furiously from the excitement of battle and I was able to shrug off the cold in moments. It would be better in the end this way. The three of us plus Terry continued on to the mountain pass.

The local wildlife, however, was not tolerant of my presence. I regretted having to kill them but I didn't have much other choice if I wanted to keep their teeth from my flesh. It shames me to admit it, but I actually allowed my companions to do a majority of the work. Terry especially seemed to delight in it, but I suspected that was because he could eat more than his fill of raw meat. *Ugh.*

The first creature to stand in my way was a mother polar bear trying to protect her little cubs. She almost bit my damn arm off, but I shifted out of the way quickly enough and my axe brought her down in a single strike. *Poor cubs, they're all alone now.*

I progressed further when a wolf darted around the corner and charged at me. Almost reflexively I jumped to the side and struck out at it with my axe. I was no longer accustomed to such aggressive wildlife and after all of my recent practice it seemed like I fought a bit overzealously. My axe cleaved clear through the poor wolf, its two halves landing on the ground in a rather sizable pool of blood that expanded across the surface of the snow before freezing solid.

There were even wild yeti guarding the mountain pass ferociously, although they didn't hold a candle to the Stillwater Giant. They were grey and ugly, not to mention slow and loud. They made the most awful noises when I cut into them, and I hoped I wouldn't have to fight many. Less because I felt sorry for them and more because of how bloody loud their annoying screeches were.

I could tell that I was beginning to near the forest when the beasts started taking a more peculiar and mystical tone. The yeti were the first such creatures, although mountain monkeys were only a little bit out of the ordinary. Wintry dragons were something else entirely. They inhaled deeply and tried to breathe the cold and snow at me as

some sort of weapon. Their magickal attacks were considerably harder to dodge than the mundane means by which most beasts fought, but I'd crafted my shield for that very purpose. The complex network of electrodes I'd wired to the shield crackled as the icy breath encountered them. The cloud of fog and snow began to dissipate shortly thereafter, fizzling out into nothingness as it yielded to my greater scientific knowledge. The beasts were dead shortly after.

At last, on the very far edge of the pass when the snow began to thaw and trees became more common I started to encounter beasts very similar to the ones I'd fought in the Lair of Bellerogrim well over a year prior. They were thickly scaled and foul tempered, but I'd defeated their likes before with only a dagger and now they stood little chance against the fiery axe that I swung around expertly.



At long last, I had reached the Glimmering Forest. It seemed like far too long ago that I had first talked of it with Loghaire Thunder Stone, and indeed my unplanned trip to Tarant had taken me over a month out of my way. It seemed like this adventuring business took up quite a great deal of time. *I do wonder what Frederick will be like when I finally return... what he's been up to in the past two years...*

The elves were friendly when we reached Qintarra, which honestly somewhat surprised me. I didn't figure they secluded themselves on the far side of nowhere because it got them plenty of visitors, but instead rather the opposite. We exchanged greetings with the guards at the entrance briefly and then I made as if to go inside when one guard stopped me.

"I won't say this again, human. You are welcome to walk the city, but if you cause any trouble here, you will be punished to the full extent of elven law."

The guard's hand moves to the hilt of his sword.

"Technology has taken much from us already... you may pass."

Well... I guess that explains that. Pleasantries, THEN threats... that's the order of things. "Good day..." I wasn't sure if he was upset simply because I was a human or if he was eyeing up the technology I carried with me. It didn't much matter, however. I certainly wasn't going to do anything to prolong my stay in the trees. I wasn't overly fond of heights, and the magick that hung thickly in the air was so potent that it was almost painful.

I climbed the staircase that had been magickally woven into the side of the tall tree and at its top I exited onto the wooden platforms that made up Qintarra. The view from the top was spectacular, but the uncomfortable feeling that struck me in the pit of my stomach quite diminished the beauty of it all. I wandered out to the edge of a platform to get a better view and I encountered an elf there, looking out into the trees. "Hello, sir. Might I ask your name?"

"My name is Mr. Windle, the master of the hunt. It's a pleasure to meet you."

He looks at the sky-he seems somewhat distracted.

I reached out to shake his hand, but he merely looked back out at the trees again, distracted. "The... uh, pleasure is mine. You said you were master of the hunt? What does that entail? I'm not overly familiar with elven society, but I'd be interested in learning."

"We have a group of hunters who supply Qintarra with food and other supplies. I am their Commander..."

That did make a bit of sense, now that he mentioned it. They certainly weren't going to domesticate animals for their meat and I couldn't foresee them making farms anytime soon. They probably used magick to force the growth of fruits and vegetables, but the same couldn't easily be done for meat. "I see. So there are a lot of hunters here in Qintarra?"

"No, we are a small community here....we never have need for more than three or four hunters at any given time"

Again, he looks up.

"Say, do you happen to know the hour?"

I nodded, "Certainly..." I would've pulled out a pocket watch, but under the circumstances that seemed embarrassing. I gazed up at the sky and judged by the position of the sun instead. "I'd say it's just

after midday, sir."

He only half-hears me.

"I'm very sorry. Normally I'd not be concerned, but he has been gone for far too long. There are strange things in the woods..."

Dark Fens... I'm not overly familiar with those. This could be interesting.

"That's worrisome, indeed. Could I be of help?" I was honestly interested in helping, but my primary motivation was, as usual, curiosity. I relished the opportunity to explore anywhere I hadn't read about in my books and the Dark Fens were supposedly the home of the altar to Makaal.

"Would you? I need to go on another hunt, but I could tell you where he was hunting and you could travel there. I'm sure it's nothing, but I get worried about my hunters. If you could see to it that he's safely on his way home, I could offer you some elven chain mail..."

"Done." I didn't care as much about the reward as just doing something good for once, but the reward could certainly be sold off for a tidy profit. Elven chain was good quality and would fetch a nice price at one of the arcane armories in Tarant.

"Good luck!"

"Goodbye. I'll return when I have news." It didn't seem particularly prudent to leave so soon after entering the city. Instead I wandered around to the northwest, holding my hand up to keep the sun out of my eyes. It was a shame I felt so uncomfortable in Quintarra considering how stunningly beautiful it all was. I continued wandering from platform to platform, catching snippets of conversations between various elves, when my eyes settled upon somebody whom I expected to be at least as uncomfortable as me: a dwarf. "Well, well, now isn't that a surprise. Who might you be?"

He glared at me impatiently and muttered, "If you must know, my name is Jormund."

Not the talkative type, I see. "What's a dwarf doing up here?"

"That is my home. What do you wish of me?"

Your HOME?! Are you completely bonkers? You've got to be itching like crazy! I can barely stand it! "I'm looking to find the elves responsible for banishing the Black Mountain Clan. Might you know anything about it?"

He garbles

"Any dwarven affiliations to... Come here and study the ways of magic. For information of that nature, you would..."

Now that's bloody strange. "Who is Raven?" I felt it important to get what information I could before laughing at or insulting the dwarf I intended to get it from.

"Welcome to Qintarra."

Although it was subtle, there was something about the matter-of-fact tone in the dwarf's voice that stuck out to me. If Raven, the Silver Lady's daughter, was the one who effectively ran the city, then it seemed unlikely for emissaries to be sent out in the Silver Lady's name. Unless she were terribly unwell since... the incident. That seemed unlikely, however. *All right. That's what I needed to know. NOW it's time to laugh at you.* "You said you were a mage? That is a bit... unusual, is it not?"

"I have been drawn towards magick for my entire life. Unlike most dwarves, I had no affinity for things of a technological nature."

Hmm... curious, indeed. I suppose it's no different than being born a peace-loving orc, or what about that Ogdin fellow back on the Isle of Despair? I do hope he enjoyed that book I gave him. "So that's why you live here?"

"I am under a tutorial agreement to my teacher, Warth. I am unable to leave until my contract is finished."

The tone in his voice was harsh and terse, and I could tell something was upsetting him as we spoke about it. "You sound as if you want to leave now."

"I cannot take living with these elves! I thought my magickal bent would make me a kin to them somehow, but that was not the case. I need to find a release from my servitude before I go mad!!!"

I felt honestly sorry for him. I could only imagine how the elves were treating him. I'd never forget the look on Loghaire's face when he described to me just how fundamentally different elves and dwarves were and how little they associated with each other since the wars of times past. "Do you dislike elves that much?"

He garbles

"Yes, it is simply the fact that dwarves and elves are simply too different."

Yes, I gathered as much from Loghaire. "How long is your contract for?" The dwarf in front of me seemed quite impatient for a dwarf. Dwarves were not at all prone to impatience. "My contract runs until the end of Warth's life. In exchange for training in the magickal arts, I agree to serve him. But that bitter old elf can last another two, possibly three hundreds years!"

Why in the gods-? "Why did you agree to such an interminable length of service?" I knew that dwarves were vastly different from humans, but I utterly could not comprehend willingly signing oneself over for three or more human lifetimes of servitude, and that wasn't accounting for how long the dwarf had already served.

"No elf wanted to take a dwarf as an apprentice, it was the best offer I could get. It was simply surly. Over the past fifty years or so he's become increasingly bitter and difficult to work for. I do not know what I will do if I can't convince him to release me soon."

Surly? Haughty, perhaps, but it's unusual for an elf to be outright surly...

"Why don't you just leave?"

"I would never dishonor myself so. The only thing that can release me besides his death is his word."

I'd been practicing my persuasive arts for some time, and I saw quite the opportunity in front of me to put them to good use. Besides, if I failed at least I wouldn't be the one that had to suffer for it. "Perhaps I could convince him to release you?"

He garbles

"I thank you for the offer, but your gold cannot help him, which would lead to greater trouble."

That's probably true. Looks like the dwarf saw through me. "If you're certain, I suppose I'll be on my way, then." I turned and walked straight away. *On my way to your mentor, that is.* I couldn't resist the challenge.

Unfortunately for me, all I discovered in the hut was a dead body. I nearly gasped, but I was becoming quite accustomed to the sight. As long as his ghost didn't raise out of his body and start yelling at me I would be fine. I was curious, however, at the scene in front of me. There were no signs of violence on the elf's body or in the room around him. I inspected further.

On the ground next to his body I found an empty glass with a strange odor inside of it. Holding the glass made me slightly more uncomfortable than I already was so I knew it couldn't be technological in nature, but still it perplexed me. *Jormund, you didn't... this isn't why you asked me not to interfere, is it? Tell me it's not so...*

Chapter the Thirty Ninth: The Exposure of Arrogance

I stuffed the glass in my purse and marched straight back to Jormund, a curious annoyance creeping over me. *I even offered to help you...!* I was too late, however. An elven guard hollered at me the moment I drew near. "What business do you have here?!" he shouted. "Jormund is under arrest for murder."

The presence of the guard struck me as terribly odd. I hadn't crossed anybody else coming onto or going off of Wrath's platform, which could only mean somebody knew of Wrath's death before I did. *There's more to this than it seems... I'd better play dumb until I figure out what's going on.* "Murder? Who is he meant to have killed?"

He garbles

"He killed Wrath, his mentor. Jormund's dislike for Wrath is well known in Qintarra, as was his wish to be released from his contract."

"That doesn't prove he killed him." *Although I made the same assumption until I encountered you here.*

The guard scoffed at me haughtily. "Who else could have done it? Elves like us don't kill each other. Besides yourself, he was the only other outsider in Qintarra when the murder occurred."

You really expect me to believe that you lot are so perfect? "Elves like us'? Are there other types of elves?"

The guard's face suddenly turned a light shade of red and he stared at the wooden platform instead of me when he answered. "Uhh... no, there are not. You must have misunderstood my meaning..."

Right. You really expect me to believe that, too. You're a terrible liar.

"How was he killed, if you don't mind my asking?"

He garbles

"We haven't determined that as of yet... at this point all we can find is no evidence of any injuries."

Please ignore the convenient proof I have right in my pocket. "What about Magick? Quench Life would have done the trick."

The guard actually laughed as I suggested it. The tone of arrogance in his voice was almost more than I could bear. "No. We of Qintarra are acutely attuned to the flows. If any dark necromancy had been used, we would have felt it."

There you go with that 'we are perfect' hogwash again. "This is all very interesting. May I go in and speak with him?"

The guard looked me in the eye, silently judging me before answering. He thought he was so much better than me, it was sickening. "Sure, go on in. But don't try anything, I'll be listening out here."

I nodded at the guard and approached Jormund. "I do not believe you are guilty of killing Wrath." That was abnormally straightforward, even for myself.

"Why do you say that?"

Who are you to question somebody that believes in your innocence? "I just don't think you would kill someone in cold blood." It was dishonest, but now wasn't the time to get into specifics. Not with that haughty elf watching.

Jormund let out a sigh, leaning up against a nearby wall. "I appreciate your confidence in me. It is a pity no one else around here shares your view. I need to get more information if I am to hope to free myself from this predicament. Do you know anything that may be of help?" *It's about time you realized you aren't exactly surrounded by friends.*

I chose my words carefully, not wanting to tip my hand to the guard listening outside. "The guard said he wasn't killed with Magick or a weapon."

Jormund seemed to take my meaning and he whispered in closely, "Is there any evidence that you know of?"

I opened the top of my purse just wide enough so that he could see the empty glass lying there, "Just this. It has a strange odor to it." He garbles

"There is only one apothecary shop in Qintarra. If the poison was bought here, he'd have been the one to sell it. I need to speak with him somehow. Until then I am confined to my house. Please, help clear my name."

"I would be happy to help you out, for a fee of course." It was like some kind of habit. I just couldn't stop asking for money. In all fairness, however, I had quite a few more important things to be doing than helping to bail out some outcast dwarf. At least for a fee I could loosely justify the actions as aiding in my search for the Black Mountain Clan.

He scratched his beard for several moments before finally stating, "I will give you my prized Staff of Xoranth for your help, madam."

I shrugged helplessly, casting him a sideways glance, "I have no use for things of Magick."

He refused to budge. "The Staff of Xoranth could fetch quite a substantial price on the open market for you."

Fair enough. I suppose it's questionable of me to demand payment in the first place. "I accept your offer, sir. Good day."

I turned and gave the guard a curt nod before scurrying off across the platforms to find the apothecary Jormund mentioned. No matter how many platforms I traversed or how often I gazed out upon the forest I never ceased to be amazed at the splendor of it all, nor did I ever grow more comfortable despite that.

The apothecary's shop was poorly labeled, but I should've expected as much for Qintarra. It was like the small town from hell. Everybody knew everybody else and outsiders were tolerated, but hardly welcome. There was a haughty elven woman looking annoyed at me as I entered, so I got right to the point, "I'm looking for Sharpe."

"Suddenly, I am his only hope."

Called out suddenly, indeed. ...and you're his 'wife'? I didn't think elves had the same customs as humans. "I needed to ask him about a poison." I showed her the empty glass with the odor in it.

She stared at me straight in the eyes for several moments before answering, barely taking her eyes off of me long enough to glance at the glass. "Yes, I recognize it. Very distinctive odor."

"Do you sell that type of poison here?" I carefully scrutinized her countenance as she formulated a response, trying to determine if she was about to lie to me. My question had been rather extremely direct. *Question three: did Sharpe poison Wrath?*

She sighed nervously, trying not to show her apprehension. "Yes, we do. I don't know if we have any at the moment, though." Her nerves were showing through quite clearly. If they normally had it, but were unfortunately fresh out, she'd just all but admitted it had been recently used.

"The poison in that glass killed Wrath. Did you know him?" *Of course you did. You both live in Qintarra. Everybody knows everybody here.*

"Warth is dead? By the gods!"

Her surprise actually seemed somewhat genuine. I was beginning to wonder if she was really in on the whole affair after all, or if she was only now beginning to realize the point of my questioning. "What can you tell me about him?"

She frowned and seemed sad, almost to the point of tears. "We had... a history. The three of us were friends, long ago, but he became angry when Sharpe and I began living together. Who killed him, that dwarven student of his?" The sudden shift in topic was far too sudden to ignore.

Damned elves! Why do you all immediately assume it was the dwarf?

"Why did he become angry when you began living together?"

She turned away, as if the wall were easier to talk to than I was. My intent stare probably made it even more uncomfortable than it

already was. "He said it was offensive and damaging to the village for us to carry on 'like humans,' as he put it." *I knew it. Elves don't marry.*

"He felt you were violating elven customs?" I knew little of elven customs, other than what I'd read about, and even that was only a faint inkling in the far back of my mind. I was curious to learn what I could firsthand.

"I believe that he was actually jealous. Sharpe and him fought often, in later years."

It's time for the big question. The one you've been avoiding. "Did Sharpe hate Wrath enough to kill him?"

She crossed her arms and stared at me angrily, her hatred evident. "It was the other way around, actually. I think Wrath became a bit unbalanced. Of course, we all know that elves do not have it in them to wantonly murder each other over things like jealousy."

Stuff it. I don't buy that whole 'we're perfect' nonsense. It comes out of your mouths so often it's like you're trying to make up for the sad truth by shouting the opposite as often and as loudly as you can. "Could Sharpe have poisoned Wrath to protect you?"

She grew more and more nervous, hastily tossing out further excuses. She was so focused on getting rid of me that she hardly realized she was just repeating herself. "If he had felt I was in danger, I believe he would do anything to protect me, even sacrifice himself. But as I said, elves would never even think of killing one another. We take a wider view of things, as you know. This life is only one that elves exist in. When we die, we go to another level. So what purpose would murder serve?"

Don't tell me you really believe the ridiculous nonsense that's spilling out of your mouth. If you're all so damned perfect, the disappearance of the Black Mountain Clan must just be a figment of my imagination, is that it? "But you yourself said that Wrath was unbalanced."

"This disturbing me. I don't wish to speak about it anymore." She finally realized that I had her cornered and no amount of 'elves are perfect' rhetoric would clear the name of her 'husband'. "Is your distress because you know Sharpe is guilty?"

She simply stared at me over her crossed arms and tapped her foot wordlessly, waiting for me to leave. *Fine. Be that way. I know Sharpe is guilty and I'm going to prove it.* I wanted to investigate her shop, but doing so would be quite difficult with her standing there. The local elves were a bit too eager to run outsiders through, so I elected instead to kill some time. The woman would have to sleep sometime, and if her 'husband' were truly out of town that would leave the shop unguarded.

Casually strolling about the treetops, though uncomfortable, was enjoyable in some regards. I was still irked at the pomposity of the elves, but it wouldn't do to label them all based on the experiences I'd had thus far. There were some good elves, too, even if the rest really made one work to realize it. I strolled up to an elf whittling away at a bow, just passing the time away with chatter. "Hello, good elf. Might I ask who you are?"

He smiled up at me, and I was immediately thankful that he wasn't inherently annoyed at my mere presence. *Finally, somebody reasonable.* "As with most elves, I have a very long name. But in your tongue, I am called Ellumyn..."

I smiled back, "A pleasure, Ellumyn." Glancing at the bow he'd been whittling I stupidly asked, "Might I ask what you do here in Qintarra?"

"I'm a craftsman, madam, I work with wood and metal to create objects of magick...weapons and talismans, the occasional piece of decorative jewelry, We all play our part here in Qintarra and that is mine...."

It actually wasn't the answer I quite expected to hear, but it was interesting nonetheless. I was beginning to like this elf. "I can see where you get wood, but where do you get metal?" I was never one to let my curiosity go unsatisfied.

He didn't seem to be bothered at all by my questioning, "Well... I've many suppliers. We trade often in Stillwater, when the need arises. But, just lately, I've run out of mithril. If you know anything about the metal, you know that it's rare. I'm having trouble finding a new source, and many of my objects are incomplete without it..."

"Interesting... I just happen to have some mithril right here..." *I came from the Wheel Clan, of course I pilfered some mithril. I didn't tell Loghaire, though. I don't think he'd have approved.*

Ellumyn perked up at my mention of it, "Really? The only place I know to obtain mithril is in the caves of the Wheel Clan. Well done! I'm offering a magickal bow in trade, if you're willing to part with it..."

Wheel Clan indeed. I've got plenty more where this came from, and I could always sell a bow. "Surely... here you go." I handed him the bulky sheet of metal I'd been lugging around.

"That's impressive my friend. The dwarves of Wheel Clan are reclusive at best....you must be quite an individual to gained their trust. Here, take this bow in Payment."

Trust isn't quite the word I'd use, but then again... I suppose Loghaire does trust me, misplaced though that trust may be. "Thank you, Ellumyn. It's been a pleasure. Good day to you." I wandered off to the next nearest platform, exploring around as the day pressed on.

I was on the complete opposite side of Qintarra as Jormund now, the town itself not being particularly large. I couldn't say that any one area of the town was really heavily populated either. I knew elves were few in number and reclusive, but there were scarcely even a few dozen of them. There had to be more that I just wasn't seeing, and certainly there were the elves that travelled or lived elsewhere, but it still struck me as odd just how few elves seemed to be in their own city.

There was one elven woman who seemed rather interesting to me on that last platform. She had a peculiar glow about her that I couldn't quite place, but it did seem familiar to me. "Hello, madam. Might I ask who you are?"

He garbles

"She is still very beautiful; however, her age and wisdom are well past her years."

Sammy, Sammy, son of... Merle didn't keep silent about my thievery

for long. She was a greedy old hag, and she fully intended to extort me for whatever she could. If she'd decided to open her mouth it would've been all over, and we both knew it. I had to do whatever she asked of me... I had no choice. I shook off the unpleasant memory and returned to my conversation. "Yes, of course. I am Samantha Colburn." I was certain the memory would return in all its 'splendor' the next time I had to introduce myself.

Whysper smiled at me, completely oblivious to what was going on in my head. "It's a pleasure to meet you, Samantha. What brings you to Qintarra?"

I shrugged, answering noncommittally, "Oh, just passing through... tasting the local flavor and what not..." *Yes, no reason at all that I'm days away from the nearest human settlement in the middle of a race of people that despise me.*

"I see." She raised her eyebrow at me curiously, smirking. I knew my lie didn't pass her scrutiny, but she didn't seem to particularly care to expose me either. "Qintarra is a strange place to drop in for a friendly visit. Well, be that as it may... what can I help you with?"

"Actually, I was curious about what exactly you do here in Qintarra." It wasn't even a lie. That had been my entire reason for approaching her in the first place, though now it occurred to me that was a rather odd thing for me to do. I could never just keep to my own damned business, so I always went everywhere bothering other people about theirs. Even now I was killing time to better facilitate solving a murder mystery which didn't concern me in the slightest. He garbles

"I suppose you could say she hears the whispers in the trees."

I knew it... that glow... I must have the same look, surrounded by magick like this. By the gods, a dwarven wizard and an elven scientist... and in Qintarra, both. "A scientist? What is it that you're studying, Whysper?"

She seemed happy to be discussing the topic with somebody that showed genuine interest. "Well, I'm studying the local wildlife... there are many strange and magickal creatures in the Glimmering Forest, and no one has really taken the time to catalogue them all, study

their unique characteristics... so I am."

"Fascinating," I marveled, "So what creatures are you studying right now?" Although I did have an academic interest in her studies, there was a certain prudence in knowing about the local fauna when one was traveling through unfamiliar climes.

She brought out a tiny little orb that glowed spectacularly even in the middle of the day. "Right now I'm cataloguing different types of Will-o-the-Wisps according to their particular essence. I'm almost finished, but I can't seem to gather a sample from the rare Vol'ar Wisp."

Her information was already far more detailed than I was accustomed to for creatures in this particular area. She was right, nobody had really bothered to study them before. I was interested in doing my part. "Perhaps I could assist you in gathering some essence...?"

He garbles

"If you go out into the woods and find a Volar's Wisp, I could offer you a magical scroll."

Not really... but I am interested in science. "I'll do so and return."

She clapped her hands excitedly, "That's wonderful! If you travel within the Glimmering Forest long enough you should run across a Vol'ars Wisp. Good luck to you, my friend!"

Long enough, eh? Surely by the time I'm through I'll be as acquainted with it as the average elf. After all I've been through I somehow doubt I'll find the answers I'm seeking quite so easily. "Good day to you, Whysper."

At last the day was almost finished. I wandered around the various platforms of the tree city once more, waiting for the dim light of dusk to fade into twilight before at last making my move. In the darkness of night I crept back towards the now-empty apothecary's shop. I was somewhat surprised that it didn't even have a door for me to bother unlocking, but then again I was in Qintarra. There was a locked container towards the rear of the shop, however it was of practically no consequence to one such as myself.

Just like I thought... the poison is here, clearly used. I swiped the incriminating vial from the container and hastily departed the shop. I strolled back over to Jormund's platform, but he was fast asleep and the guard watching over him didn't seem to be in a particularly friendly mood. I was tired anyhow and it seemed like a good time to catch up on some rest, so I found an open bench and lied down for a spell. Virgil and Vollinger didn't seem to mind overly much, and Terry quite liked the open air.

Sleep was fitful and uncomfortable for me, especially considering how surrounded I was by magick. *I've got to get out of this bloody city... and the forest as well, though I've a feeling I won't be rid of this area quite so easily.* Groggily I wandered back to Jormund's hut to find him awake and the guard from the previous day having returned to his post. "I believe I know who killed Wrath..." I taunted the guard.

He crossed his arms and stared down at me, "Oh? And who would that be?"

I spoke my words clearly, wielding them as though they were a weapon against elven arrogance and prejudice. "Sharpe. Wrath and Sharpe were in love with the same woman."

"Weirdness. But as I have already explained to you, elves just don't have a formal code for these foolish accusations."

I wouldn't dare make an accusation like that without the proof I knew you'd ask for, you haughty bastard. "Like this?" I held out the vial of poison and he sniffed at it carefully.

His eyes widened suddenly with incredible shock and he took a step back, "This is not possible! Elves don't kill each other... it just doesn't happen!" He shook his head sadly, muttering, "I should have known... with them living in the same house, acting as if they were 'married'. Our village is our family! Romantic lovers may be something some of us play at when we're young, but no self-respecting adult shuts himself apart from the community that way! It disrupts the communal flow!"

"Obviously Sharpe was bent on ruining the social order!" I was sure he wouldn't detect my sarcasm or I'd have never bothered to say it.

So much for that 'we are perfect' nonsense, eh?

He seemed quite angry and continued muttering, "I knew something like this would happen eventually. Those freaks, trying to ruin Quintarra with their 'marriage'! It all makes sense now."

I cleared my throat quite purposefully. "I'm assuming you'll be releasing Jormund, now?"

He garbles

"Of course, he will be sending some men around to arrest that scholar."

"You have fun with that. I'll be going now." I stepped past the guard and confronted Jormund.

Jormund looked up at me, almost embarrassed. "Thank you for clearing my name."

"You're welcome, Jormund."

"Here is the staff I promised you. You are always welcome in my home."

I took the staff from him and handed it off to Virgil for safekeeping. I certainly didn't want to hold onto it, and Virgil used to have a thing for staves. "Aren't you going to leave, now that Wrath is dead?"

Jormund nodded, "I am sure that I will take my leave of this place soon enough. First I must decide where I am off to, eh?"

I thought about asking him to accompany me, but the idea of having anybody more magickally inclined than Virgil along just didn't agree with me. "Perhaps we will meet again, then. Good day, and good luck wherever you may travel."

"Indeed. Thank you again, madam." I turned and walked away. At last I was done poking my nose around where it didn't belong. It was horribly rude of me, and counterproductive, but I just couldn't help myself. I always wanted to explore whenever I reached somewhere new.

I wandered back across several platforms, seeking out the one that I had carefully avoided on the previous day. There was a rather stern

looking woman standing guard in front of a massive doorway and no less than three other elves stood guard around her. Even from a distance there could be no mistaking her identity. I approached and looked her straight in the eyes, "I'm sorry, I don't believe we've met..." He garbles

"No... you're correct... we've never met..."

This elven woman looks at me evenly. Her skin is light, almost translucent, with hair of dark crimson, almost black. She is beautiful, but very severe.

Well this is going to be a barrel of laughs. "Uh... okay. I'll get right to the point. You're Raven, are you not?" She nodded almost imperceptibly. "I'm here to speak with the Silver Lady."

Her eyes narrowed at me and she took on a gratingly condescending tone. "Oh... you mean my mother. That's quite a request, and one not so easily granted..."

It was all I could do to avoid rolling my eyes. "Believe me, Raven... she's going to want to speak with me..." Technically, I was an official emissary for Loghaire Thunder Stone.

He garbles

"And believe ME when I tell you that NO ONE sees my mother until I see fit as necessary. She may be our queen, but I oversee the daily matters here in Qintarra."

I'm well aware that not all elves are required to be arrogant, annoying, and incredibly self-important... so why is it that so many of you choose to be like that? I sighed, trying to think of the shortest possible way to get an audience without making any more enemies than I already had. "I see. How can I convince you of the urgency of my quest...?"

She seemed to sense the resentment in my voice and she relented slightly. "You'll have your chance," her voice had grown softer, though compared to a normal person she still spoke rather firmly. "Forgive me if I seem a little abrupt, but I've many things on my mind today, and there is much to be done. Once I've taken care of some of the more pressing matters, I'll talk with you about your needs..."

Standing there like that, you don't particularly look like you're taking care

of anything. "I understand. Perhaps I could be of service?" I knew all too well that if I wanted anything to get done I had to do it myself, no matter who I was dealing with.

She gazed out over the forest thoughtfully, "Hmmm. It's possible... you ARE human, and one of our problems does concern humans. No offense, but your race is a mystery to me..."

Right. All humans are the same, so certainly this human MUST be able to help you with your human problem. Ugh. "Probably no more of a mystery than your bad manners are to me..." *Bloody hell, did I actually say that one out loud? Well, it's true.*

"My manners and your opinion are of little importance in comparison with the safety of this village, stranger. If you've a problem with that, you're more than welcome to leave."

Indeed, I actually did say that out loud. Oops. "Understood. Are you sure I can't help?"

She stared at me, not bothering to conceal the hatred she had for me and all others of my kind. To her I would never be Samantha, I would always just be another human girl. "There is a group of humans camped a few days journey from here. We know not what they want, but where humans go, trouble usually follows. The place they are camped is called Falcon's Ache, and it is considered a holy place for the elves of Qintarra. We would like you to find out why the humans are there, and remove them..."

That's where the altar of Ter'el is located... "I'll do it." Perhaps I hadn't hesitated long enough.

"Splendid."

She smiles warmly.

"Are you sure you understand what needs to be done? There are a few things that are VERY important that you know..."

"I just need to know where it is..." *Stuff your arrogance, woman. I'll not accept any advice from you when you take that tone with me. If your holy ground gets soiled because you neglected to mention something that's on your conscience not mine.*

She marked my map with a location only about three days journey

away. I nodded, "Thanks, I'll be back when it's done." I could hear her chuckling lightly as I left. *Hmm... she let me leave too easily. If there was something important to the elves, she'd have made damn sure I knew about it. No, she's hiding something... something far more important to me than to her. Damnation, how do I keep getting myself into these messes?*

Chapter the Fortieth: Lying Is Only Slightly Less Despicable When For A Good Cause

I journeyed to Falcon's Ache with little difficulty. I was almost looking forward to encountering some kind of Wisp on the way, even if it weren't a Vol'Ars Wisp, but it simply wasn't meant to be. *There's plenty of time. I'll find one, I'm sure of it.* I could easily tell when Falcon's Ache drew near: there was something terribly odd about it and I didn't realize exactly what it was until a fluffy, white bunny scampered across my path.

I looked after it suspiciously, almost tempted to chop at it just for good measure. It was pure white, however, so I decided to leave it be. Had it been blue I'd not have been nearly so kind. As I lowered my axe I realized the bunny's presence was quite the oddity, I'd scarcely seen even the slightest bit of wildlife since first entering the forest. That much made sense, the local creatures weren't used to intrusions by obnoxiously loud humans. Why, then, was this little bunny not afraid?

As I neared the lake that made up Falcon's Ache I saw other creatures as well, even a massive gorilla. I didn't really think to question the presence of a gorilla in a forest, but I knew then that I had to be careful. There were so many creatures living in peace with each other that normally would've been at each other's throats, and I trusted their instincts. There was more than just superstition that made this an elven holy ground and I took great care not to disrupt the balance of things.

I spied the altar to Ter'el in a small grove not far from the water's edge so I visited it briefly. I placed a Li'tani that I'd purchased from a street vendor in Ashbury onto the altar and said a brief prayer. Much

to my surprise, when I opened my eyes the Li'tani was gone and I could feel a warm presence washing over me. *Good heavens, and this is only the first of them! I'm onto something indeed!* I wondered just how much professor Buxington had known, and how little he really told me. There was no way he could be unaware of what I'd just experienced.

Shaking it off, I tried to focus my mind on the task at hand. There was a group of men gathered around a campfire along the edge of the water and I wandered over to them, intent on getting them to up and leave. One of the men seemed to command some respect amidst the others so I singled him out and chatted him up. "Hello, sir. And who are you?"

"I am William Bench, outdoorsman, naturalist, and head of this expedition. And who might you be?"

Sammy, Sammy, son of... Merle, in her greed, had demanded that I begin selling my body. I didn't have any choice... I had to do it, or she would've turned me in. She stole all the profits I made, and I made it a point to steal from each and every one of the bastards that paid her for my 'services'. They wouldn't dare tell the guard they were paying off the orphanage caretaker to sleep with one of her girls.

The man I was speaking with crossed his arms and cleared his throat purposefully. I realized I'd been staring off into the fire. "I'm Samantha Colburn... a pleasure. May I ask what you are doing here?" "We're employed by the Torringsdale Logging Company... we've a contract to map out these northern lands, which were recently purchased by Torringsdale, and report on the usability of its resources. Boring job, really."

I looked at him with a very severe expression on my face. "Hmmm. We may have a problem here, Mr. Bench." *I'd better make this good.*

He seemed impatient, as if he'd been expecting some kind of trouble. "Oh really? And what might that be?"

"Unfortunately, you're not supposed to be here..." I had to choose my words carefully, his very job depended on his success here and he wasn't going to accept any old reason for leaving. Telling him it was

elven holy ground was straight out, I knew a logger would never let cultural relations get in the way of his profit. I had to think of an even better excuse, one he wouldn't immediately dismiss. I knew precious little about modern logging operations, so it wasn't an easy lie to craft.

Mr. Bench stared me in the eyes angrily, "I see no problem here, stranger. In fact, I think I'm going to have to ask you to leave... this here is private property, and you're trespassing." He glanced back at the men he'd been chatting with moments earlier and they all nodded, giving me distrustful looks.

"I think I'll be able to persuade you otherwise, Mr. Bench." I said it in such a way as to try and throw him off guard, and not conform to his expectations.

"Really? Listen, friend. I'm here to do a job... William Bench is a man of his word, and Torringsdale expects a report on his desk in a week. I don't think there's much you're going to be able to say that will dissuade me from doing what I'm here to do."

"Uh..." my voice started out uncertain, but as the lie took shape in my mind I grew more confident. I tried to sound as though Mr. Bench would be in dire straits indeed if he didn't hear me out. "You might think differently if you knew who I represent..."

He seemed to grow angry at that. "Who YOU represent? I see... let me guess. You're one of the blokes from Wextel Lumber, right? Wait... I see it all now... you're here to tell me YOU have legal rights to this land..."

It would've been too easy to confirm his suspicions, but I could tell he had an answer all prepared for me if I were to follow along. No, I had to be more clever than that. "You're half correct, but I'm not here from Wextel Lumber... I represent Gilbert Bates."

He seemed taken aback. *Perfect. That's it, play along on my strings, little puppet...* "Bates? BATES? What interest would Gilbert Bates have in logging? The man supplies the engines for our clear-cutters!"

I shrugged, "He's thinking of getting into the logging business... it could be quite profitable for him considering, as you said, he supplies

the engines for the clear-cutters. He wants to cut out the middle-men, so to speak."

"Mr. Bates? In the logging business? But he owns so much already! Why would someone with such an obvious monopoly in his field of expertise want to take over logging as well?"

I pretended to grow impatient, treating the man like an idiot. "He sees an opportunity... are you going to question him?" There was an implication there that the man was so stupid he couldn't possibly understand a 'greater' man such as Bates. I almost couldn't believe what I was saying.

He took the bait, of course, and started acting horribly flustered.

"Uhh... no, no... of course not! I'm not saying I'd question Mr. Bates' judgment! But what, exactly, are YOU doing here? I mean, this land is owned by Torringsdale..."

I shook my head at him as if I pitied him, "Well, Mr. Bates is contesting that in court as we speak..."

He stared at me, starting to regain his composure very slightly. "In court? I have legal documents here stating the validity of the Torringsdale claim! How could Mr. Bates contest this?"

I laughed lightly and he seemed so very suddenly unsure of himself.

"Do you really think that legality is a concern of Mr. Bates?"

"No, I see your point. Well, what exactly are you proposing? I've still a job to do, but I'm not one to make the wrong sort of enemies.

Maybe Mr. Bates is looking to do some business here?"

I grinned at him slyly, "Perhaps I could put in a good word for you... Mr. Bates pays his employees VERY well, you know."

He smiled and winked at me. "That, my friend, would be very much appreciated. I'm thinking that our little party here might have fallen into some difficulties... you know, hazards of the trade... perhaps a violent storm? And since we'd lost all of the provisions..."

I finished his sentence for him, "...you had to go back early. Very nice, William" I said it so condescendingly, as would be entirely appropriate for anybody who was actually in the employ of Gilbert Bates. Well, technically I was working for Bates, and by extension he

would be quite pleased to have Mr. Bench pack up and leave so that I might get some answers about the Black Mountain Clan. It was odd how my lie was so close to the truth, yet still not quite right.

"Thank you, Samantha Colburn. I was always a good storyteller. And you'll make sure to pass on my name to Mr. Bates? He'll be in need of surveyors as well."

I had to actually hold myself back from laughter. "I'll say that you can always lie to..." *Oh hell.* I coughed quickly to cover up what I'd said. "I mean... RELY on Mr. Bench."

He clapped me on the shoulder in a friendly gesture, "Right! We'll get packed right away and leave. I'll look forward to hearing from you soon."

Yeah. Don't count on it. I waved goodbye to Mr. Bench with a smile and directed my travels Northward to the dark fens. I didn't like the idea of returning to Qintarra quite so soon, and I was more than a little bit excited to find the altar there. There was also the business of searching out that elven hunter fellow, but it honestly wasn't at the top of my priority list.

I nearly gasped when I reached the point that had been marked on my map. I'd heard the barest mention of lizard people in a few books I'd read, but I never suspected they actually existed. There were several colors of them, too, most of them being green or red. In the center of their little village I found the elven hunter I was looking for, trapped in a deep pit with lizards guarding the edges, spitting at him. *This is not good.*

I gathered my courage and wits about me and marched around the village looking for somebody I could hopefully talk with. I really did not want to have to resort to violence, especially since the damn things were as tall as the Stillwater Giant. I found a blue lizard parading around about a particularly distinguished tent and I figured he'd be the one to talk to. He hissed at me as I approached. The creature before me is covered in scales with a large mouth full of sharp teeth and eyes of the coldest silver. Various tattoos cover much of its body.

"Warmblood betrayer. Offspring murderer. What brings you here? What death do you bring?"

What the hell kind of a greeting is that? "I'm sorry?" I was incredibly annoyed. "Have we met before? I've never seen your kind..." Don't you DARE threaten me, or you'll find out just how great my 'power' really is, you thick-skinned bastard.

He hissed, "I know you, betrayer. I know ALL your faces, warm-blood. All the same. All liars and murderers. All bringers of death..."

As correct as he was, I didn't want to hear any of it. If anything, the accuracy of what he said angered me further. "You don't know who I am. It's presumptuous of you to say so." I seethed, desperately wanting to strike out at him but holding myself back for fear of validating his claims right then and there.

He spat at me contemptuously, "Kan Kerai senses your anger. Perhaps you wish to set yourself against me, warm-blood?"

No... I will not sink to that. I can rise above who I once was, I can be a better person. "Of course not. Maybe you should tell me what's going on here."

"You know, warmblood. Pits lined with teeth of metal, nets to catch the women, your weapons of flash and pain. You hunt all the children and the old, but Kan-Kerai is no such easy target. Face ME, warmblood..."

Enough with your damned threats already. Are you really that eager to have my axe buried at the base of your skull? "Pits with teeth... nets... are your people being hunted?" It was difficult to discern exactly what the lizard was trying to say through all of the hate spilling forth.

"Hunted?" He seemed surprised that I was not yet attacking him. In part, I was also surprised. "Yes... our women and offspring. The old ones. Now Kan Kerai will hunt. I have already captured the pale, sharp-eared warm-blood. Bound him with my power. You will be next. And then Kan Kerai will go to the warm-blood tree village, and burn it to the ground..."

Bound him with your power? You threw him in a damned pit. Give me a

break. "You think the elf was hunting your people?" The lizard struck me as borderline delusional. I was half tempted to tell him to go right ahead and march up to the gates of Qintarra, just to see how far he got. I wasn't done with the city yet, though.

Again, he seemed confused. It occurred to me that I was the first real person he'd actually bothered to have a conversation with. "You mean sharp-ear? Pale warm-blood? We captured him, sneaking into our swamps, planning more death with his weapons and his strange ways. But Kan Kerai fell upon him, and my ways were greater than his, and I brought him back here... tied like the fruit of the hunt..."

Get over yourself. You think your primitive tribe really has greater ways than the elves? You really are delusional. "Have you ever had ANY problems with the pale warm-bloods before?" I tried to use his odd turns of phrase so he could better understand.

He stops for a moment, considering.

"No, sharp-ears have not killed Bedokaan before, nor have they ruined the land. But we are not easy prey, warmblood. A hunter in different lands is still a hunter. And Kan-Kerai goes not quietly."

Good god, shut up already! "Hold a moment. Neither the elves nor I have done you harm..."

He stayed silent for several moments, a peace which I secretly relished. Finally, he uttered, "Yes. The words you speak are true, warm-blood. But..." he moved his hand to the crudely-forged sword he had hanging on his belt. "...that does not mean that you will not."

"Agreed." I said, perhaps a touch too emphatically. He obviously didn't grasp enough of the nuances of human language to really infer just how badly I wanted to hurt him. "I am called Samantha Colburn." I tried not to think about how old Merle found 'clients' for her new business, nor how many girls might have had to suffer the same fate as I did in the past. Now was clearly not the time to dwell on such things.

The lizard looked at me curiously and stiffly with movements that suggested he was terribly confused. "And I am Kan Kerai, chieftain of the Bedokaan. What brings you to our village, warm-blood? Have you

come in defense of this... e-elf?"

I almost laughed at the uncomfortable way in which he pronounced elf. "Yes, among other things. I believe you are imprisoning him wrongly."

"What know you of their ways? You assume that elves are innocent and Bedokaan are evil. I know this... all warmbloods think like you. They fear the cold-blood ways; they see us as beasts devoid of love or reason..."

Not this again. Shut UP! "Please forgive me. I meant no offense. What has happened here?"

He thrashed his tail around the dirt with uncertainty, staring at me, "You would hear our story? Very well. As I've said, the Bedokaan have lived in the Dark Fens for as long as the seasons have turned, and for all that time we have kept to ourselves. We knew of the elves, but they harmed us not, and we accepted their natural place....

"Four winters ago, warm-blood came to our swamps, and set out things of death, and shot us with their weapons, and collected the bodies of the dead."

I arched an eyebrow at him, "Who were these warm-bloods? You said they were not elves..."

"No, not elves."

He looks at me, then smells the air in front of me.

"I know it was not you, Samantha Colburn, but they were of your kind. And there were many of them, and they rode on strange creatures made of wood."

I nodded, paying attention to his story as he spoke. It seemed like I was actually getting somewhere in negotiating with the beast, but that didn't mean I could relax just yet. "I see. Men in wagons. Where did they come from?"

He hissed, getting angrier as he related his story. "From the south. They came from the south, over the mountains and into the Dark Fens. And the land cries out wherever they touch it. They know not the way of the land, or the cold-blood ways. Nor do they care.... My people.... They skinned them, Samantha Colburn. They skinned our

elders and our children and our women, and then threw their remains into the swamp. No rites of passage, no guide to the snake-fathers..."

I suddenly understood his anger, and even sympathized with it. I couldn't imagine what it would be like to have to endure such a thing happening to your own family. "Dear god... poachers. I'm so very sorry, Kan Kerai..."

"I believe your words, Samantha Colburn. Perhaps YOU are different. Perhaps YOU might be able to see the cold visions. I will regret having to make war on all the warmbloods if there is even one like you among them. But I will do so nonetheless..."

And we were chatting so peacefully... "Make war? But it is only these men....!"

He cut me off, "Yes, but there is a price in warm-blood that must be paid. Men will die, and then all of their offspring until there are none left. Only this will quiet the fury of the snake-fathers. Elves are warm-blood. They will die as well."

I'm sure you'll get quite far with your band of 12 lizards. Good heavens, you really don't have any idea do you? "Please, you must allow me to convince you otherwise..."

"How, Samantha Colburn?" He hissed my name fiercely, but not hatefully. "I respect your words, and I see the truth in them, but how can you deny the evil of what has been done to me and my people? Do you disagree that a price must be paid?"

I shook my head, "No, but not all must pay the price. Let us talk about the elves..."

"Yes, let us speak of this. The snake and the lizard are both of the snake-fathers; both live in the reptilian dream. Men and elves are also the same—of the warmblood—and therefore live by the same code..."

"That's wrong. The elves have their own code, different from that of men..." I was almost pleading with him, but I wasn't sure of how else to proceed. It was getting easier and easier to persuade men, but Kan Kerai was completely foreign to me. He couldn't understand any of the subtleties of my language.

He seemed confused, as I had somewhat expected. "What do you mean? Are they not smooth-skinned like men, hunt with weapons and wear clothes and speak fancy words? They seem to me the very same..."

Fancy words...? Ah, he must mean magick. That alone should tell him the difference between most elves and men. "Elves live in trees, men live in buildings of wood and stone..."

He started to grow angry, "These are small things, small differences. I speak of hearts and minds... the dreams of the warm-blood. It is there that elves are the same as men, in their hearts, in their words..."

I nearly growled at him. "No! You said the elves have words of power... men do not. Don't you see? There are many differences, some small and some much greater."

"Yes..."

You see that Kan-Kerai is a little confused.

"We also have these words, Samantha Colburn. These powers, old powers, tied to the waters and the land. I see that the elves have these powers and yet they are warmbloods."

I sighed, feeling like I was finally getting somewhere. "That is because they, too, are tied to the land..."

"I see." Kan Kerai tilted his head peculiarly. "There is power in YOUR words as well, Samantha Colburn. Perhaps you are correct about these elves. But what of men? Why shouldn't Kan Kerai war against them?"

Go right ahead. Kill the damned poachers for all I care, but not all men are poachers. Hmm... It occurred to me that Kan Kerai's ideal of war was rooted in a misunderstanding. "Tell me of the cold-blood, what is it like..."

He stood up proudly, regaling me with tales of his people, "We beat of one heart, Samantha Colburn. We share the same knowledge, the same desires. To look into my eyes is to look into the very eyes of the snake-fathers. Do you understand? We are many, but we are one."

I nodded, finally beginning to make sense of it all. "Men are different, with different hearts. Sadly, some are dark..." *And mine is no exception...*

"Ah. You say the warmblood heart is alone and beats alone. I can see why elves might be good, but I am not sure how some MEN are good and others evil. Is the blood that flows in your veins not the same blood?"

I was almost at a loss as to how to explain such a fundamental difference to him. "That is an important difference... men's hearts MAKE their dreams..."

He sat there quietly for a moment, thinking on what I'd said.

"Interesting, Samantha Colburn. So these... poachers... as you call them, they dream an evil dream. And so they kill our people. But how am I to know that most men are not like them, that you are ALONE in your dream?"

That's an easy one. "If that were so, would they let one like me survive?"

He finally nodded, understanding. "No... nature is a harsh teacher. Even among the Bedokaan, if there is one who does not hear the snake-fathers, or see the cold visions, then he is cast out or destroyed. I would think that it is the same among warm-bloods."

I smiled at him, though I realized the gesture was probably wasted. Lizards didn't really smile. "It is. Men are evil, but many more are good..." *I don't actually believe that, but you should if you want your tribe to live on.*

"Perhaps then it is only these poachers that Kan-Kerai must make war against. If most men are like you, Samantha Colburn, then perhaps the warmblood ways are good ways. I thank you for showing me this. I am grateful."

Good heavens, finally. It's about bloody time. "And the elf? He will go free?"

Kan Kerai hissed gently, "Yes. He is free to return to his home... make sure to speak with him before you leave and tell him he may leave. I will make amends myself, and send gifts to the elves in the forest.

You have made peace between us, Samantha Colburn..."

"Glad to be of service." *At least if I've done one bloody good thing in my whole life I've done this.*

Kan Kerai tilted his head at me, finally remembering an earlier portion of our conversation. "Tell me, Samantha Colburn. Why have you come to these strange lands? You are not of the forest elves, nor are you of the Dark Fens. What is it that brings you to us?"

Hmm, there's really no good way to say it briefly. "It is a long tale, Kan Kerai, but perhaps I can sum it up best by saying this: an ancient evil known as Arronax is threatening to return and destroy the world as we know it. I'm... well, this is somewhat related." I paused, thinking of just how little I knew of Arronax. I didn't know where the hell Joachim was during all of this, but if anybody could answer my questions it would be him. Chasing after the Black Mountain Clan in the meantime was just a distraction. I hoped that once I got people to stop trying to kill me, I'd be able to find out more about that whole Living One nonsense.

"I know not of many things outside the Bark Fens, but the Bedokaan are warriors and we love this land as no other. I offer the strength of my people if you desire it. In the village there is one named Waromon. Speak with him, and if he desires, you may take him on your quest. He is brave and powerful."

I didn't really wish to bring a magickally inclined lizard along with me, but I was grateful for the sentiment nonetheless. "I'll speak with him. Good day to you, Kan Kerai..." I took a few steps back and Kan Kerai nodded at me with a light hiss, then I turned around and walked towards the pit.

On my way to the pit I spotted a strange blue stone on the ground. I picked it up curiously and examined it, noticing that it seemed awfully familiar to me. That's when I realized it had to be heartstone. I'd read descriptions of it before but never knew where it could be obtained. I took out another sheet of mithril and, following along the schematic that Erick Obsidian had given me, I bent the light, pliable mithril around the heartstone in an unusual shape.

When I was finished there was no doubt in my mind what I'd just

made. *I would recognize this key anywhere.* I suddenly could barely contain my excitement to get back to Tarant. I picked up a few more stones and approached the elven hunter just as he was climbing out of the pit using a rope ladder the lizards had dropped for him.

"Thank you stranger. I'm going back to Qintarra. I recommend you do the same."

"I just might do that. Good day to you..." The hunter ran off in quite the hurry and I couldn't say I particularly blamed him. I had one more important stop to make before I, too, returned to Qintarra. I didn't know when I'd be back this way again and I'd gathered enough heartstones for a little treat.

I placed a heartstone on the altar and closed my eyes, praying briefly. It felt unusual for me to pray since I'd impugned religion for the majority of my life. Nevertheless, the heartstone had vanished by the time I opened my eyes and I could feel a warm presence around me. *There's no doubt in my mind now, these gods are very, very real.*



With that business taken care of it was time to return to Qintarra for my audience with the Silver Lady. I had no idea what exactly she would tell me, or if Raven would even let me in to see her without making me run yet more errands, but I was quite anxious to find out.

Chapter the Forty First: One Woman's Madness Is Another's Truth

I returned to Qintarra, my mind thinking on the Bedokaan over the course of my journey. They struck me almost as a relic of the past, a race that could not exist anywhere but here in the far reaches of civilization. It shamed me to admit it, but Kan Kerai was right, in a way, to wish ill upon the race of men. If his tribe had existed to the South of the Grey Mountains instead of to the North they likely would no longer exist.

Upon first re-entering Qintarra I spied Mr. Winde still staring out at the trees, although his countenance seemed a bit easier. His hands were relaxed at his sides instead of tensed and he breathed the forest air in deeply. "Good day, Mr. Winde. Have you heard from your missing hunter?"

"Yes..he returned here, and told me of waht happened with Bedokaan. The elves of Qintarra are indebted to you friend. Please...take the armor for your brave actions."

"It was no trouble at all, sir. I'm just glad to have been of help." I took the armor from him and handed it off to Virgil carefully, wiping my hand off on my dress afterwards. *Now where was I...? Right.* I travelled across the bridge to the Northeast and onto Raven's platform. She stared at me as suspiciously as usual, but I tried my best not to be confrontational. "Hello, Raven. I've removed the humans from Falcon's Ache."

"Thank you very much. Your help in this matter is much appreciated. Now, what was it you needed to speak to my mother about?"

I sighed heavily, trying to think of where to begin. I didn't particularly care to share the details with her, but I knew there would be no seeing the Silver Lady if Raven detected any dishonesty on my part. To be safe I had to disclose everything. "That... is a long story,

Raven. I don't suppose you're overly familiar with the Black Mountain Clan, or the dwarf called Stennar Rock Cutter among them. You see... that dwarf escaped, I know not from where, and he met his end on the I.F.S. Zephyr.... I, too, was on that zeppelin and when it crashed I was the only one left unharmed. In his last moments, Stennar gave me a ring, which I traced to Gilbert Bates, and Bates has had me searching for the missing clan ever since. I'm here now on behalf of both Gilbert Bates and Loghaire Thunder Stone to inquire as to the exile of the Black Mountain Clan, at the hands of the elves... in the name of the Silver Lady."

She seemed troubled as I related my tale to her, and she stood in thought for a long time after I mentioned her mother's name. "A dark tale, full of pain. And it would seem that the blame lies with us, the elves..."

Her concern actually seemed genuine and she seemed to be reconsidering her former opinion of me even as we spoke. Certainly I wasn't simply another human curiosity visiting Qintarra for my own sake... even if curiosity did play a strong part in it. "There are elves involved... do you know the name of M'in Gorad?"

"I do not, and none of the elves who live here bear it. But it bothers me very much; it pulls darkly at my heart and mind. There is another possibility, but I'd rather not think of it."

This is no time to be concealing information. Do you care so little for the plight of the dwarves?! "What, Raven? Do you know where I might find M'in Gorad?"

She shook her head, still lost in thought. "No... you need to speak with my mother of these things... she will know what to do..."

Although it seemed like she was brushing me off, I knew I wouldn't be granted an audience with the Silver Lady so lightly under any other circumstances. Truly, Raven was troubled by what I had said. "All right... is she in that door behind you?"

Raven nodded, as though suddenly becoming aware of my presence yet again, "Yes... but be warned, my mother is a magickal being of great power. Her spirit swims in the flow, and sometimes she is more of that world than this one. What she sees is not always what we see,

so her answers might seem strange to you. Ask what you wish to know, and LISTEN. When you're through speaking with her, come and find me..."

I gulped uncomfortably. *I'd nearly forgotten just how potent she's supposed to be. This is going to be unpleasant to say the least.* "I will, Raven. Thank you for your help." I walked past her, unhindered, and into the chamber beyond. It was dark, lit only dimly by a pair of magick lanterns on either side of the room. My skin burned as I stepped into the chamber and I almost wanted to cry out in pain, but I clenched my teeth and fought back the tears. No matter how uncomfortable it was, I had to go through with it. I wondered idly if increasing my technological inclination further would make such encounters more or less tolerable. On the one hand I would suspect it would make the pain even greater, but on the other hand my own inclination would better offset hers and I might feel the force of her power less potently. It didn't particularly matter in the end, I was here now and nothing would change the pain that I felt in so being. "Hello.... I welcome you, traveler."

Her voice was shallow and ethereal, echoing despite the cramped chamber. As Raven had mentioned, she truly did not seem like a being fully in this world. It was a frightening thought to contemplate, and I began to understand that her seclusion was not merely a symptom of her status. She truly didn't belong with the rest of the elves... or the rest of the world. "Greetings to you, Silver Lady. I thank you for this audience..."

Her voice haunted me, echoing, piercing my very soul with every word she spoke. "I know you've come far... and I've expected you for a long time, now. I've seen you approaching from both east and west, traveler... and you bring them with you, all of them... they've no choice but to follow."

'Them'? Virgil, Vollinger, and Terry? Somebody else I've not met yet? This woman truly does speak in riddles. "Please... I don't understand..."

"I know, I know... we speak different languages, you and I. The things I see, wrapped in the past and the present, and shrouded in the veils of magick... I cannot translate my visions into your own. You must listen traveler, listen and learn to see..."

I gulped uncomfortably yet again. "I will try, Silver Lady..."

"What is it you seek, traveler...?" She asked, staring at me... or almost at me. It would've been more accurate to say that she was staring through me, and hers was a gaze that I could feel piercing every aspect of my being. My skin felt like it was on fire, and the air in the room burned in my lungs even as I breathed it.

"Do you know if I'm the Living One?" It may not have been directly related to my reasons for being there, but if there was one question I would get answered before I passed out from the pain it was going to be that one. It was something I simply needed to know.

She laughed, her voice a curious mix of a raspy old woman and a Panarii choir. It was at once a discomfoting noise and a musical composition. "The Living One? Oh, traveler, why would you think I would know of such a thing?"

Because you purport to know all that is, was, and will be? Perhaps? "It's a prophecy... I assume you can see what is to come..."

She laughed again, louder and more musically. Her voice became many voices and those voices were the strings on violins, the blaring of trumpets, and the exotic pattering of primitive drums. "It's an interesting thing about prophecies, traveler. They're no clearer to one such as myself, living both in and out of the stream, than they are to you, walking the shore. The flow swirls AROUND them, until they are ready. And in the end, really, is it going to matter who someone pointed a finger at?"

I sighed dejectedly, "That would be comforting if people weren't trying to kill me."

"These people can only see what follows in your wake, traveler. Pass your hand through the flame, and it flickers. If you are tired of the mantle, then shed it. Disappear. Otherwise, don't be surprised at what people do..."

I suppose that is an interesting way of looking at it. "You've a point, there. What can you tell me of the Black Mountain Clan?"

She paused for only a moment, then her eyes flickered eerily and she spoke, "Yes, I can see them... but the ravens are circling, and the

storm rages but subsides, and yet there is lightning and then shadow, and then the storm howls again, tearing... I can't even look at it! Wait... oh! Look! They've taken in a small child with machine-dreams, and hands of hinged metal, and a heart in which coal burns brightly...

"I see a flame atop a hill, burning so brightly! And below, a field of wheat around a pool of water... and the flame spitting fire and consuming the wheat and the lake, and losing itself as well... It's dark here... so dark... and the flame is here, too, but this flame burns black onyx and cold, and shadow is its child... are they here as well? I can't see that far... A plain of mirrored glass, a sky of white, a lone figure. Wait... which is the reflection? I'm unsure."

I frowned, quite thoroughly confused, "You're speaking in riddles, Silver Lady."

"That is all I see, traveler. The riddle is created by you... do you have anything else you'd like to ask?"

If you're going to answer like that again, no. I sighed. "M'in Gorad... what can you tell me of that name?"

Again, she seemed lost for a brief moment before latching onto something in the sea of dreams that she floated upon. "M'in Gorad... an old name, traveler. Oh...! A man is screaming, and carves a key with his fingers, and the birds have plucked his eyes out... and the wolf watches, motionless, his paw in the air... A tear in the curtain, and only darkness beyond... a crooked finger points eastward, adorned with a ring of blasted stone...

"A hand that sees, but is blinded... a man draped in truth, wearing a mask... And they hide! The lost children! They hide! A gray mist, even to me... but there! He runs! Dropping veined and painted leaves! And the flock comes, talons outstretched and wings of fire, and he is consumed... but the leaves! Run quickly, traveler! Find what was left behind! In the place of smoke and water... he is there! He is there! I see no more. The stream is again calm. Was there anything else?"

I paused momentarily, trying to make sense of anything that had just spilled out of her mouth. "No... but I understand almost none of what you said..."

"I know that, traveler. But I also know that clarity is often the child of time. Your answers lie both in front and behind... make sure not to overlook one for the other..."

With a heavy sigh I simply said, "Characteristically cryptic, dear Lady."

She laughed again, though quieter now, the instruments subsiding from their past crescendo. "I go now, traveler. We will meet again... though I'm not sure on which side. No matter. Farewell..."

It might not matter to you, but I'd rather prefer to stay alive if you don't mind. Bewildered I stumbled out of the chamber, at last the fire on my skin diminishing to an unpleasantly warm sensation. Raven stood outside, staring at me curiously. "H-hello, Raven... I... spoke to your mother, if you could quite call it that. I'll be damned if I understood one bit of what she said, though. I asked her about the Black Mountain Clan and she started talking about lightning, and Bates, flames and wheat, a pool, dark fire... a mirrored plain..." I shook my head trying to dispel all of the nonsense she'd crammed into it.

Raven nodded, "Let's take it one step at a time, shall we? I'll help you try and make sense of what she said."

That would be... uncharacteristically helpful of you, Raven. Thanks. "All right. She saw ravens, and lightning, and a violent storm."

He garbles

"Ravens and a storm. And why did the storm subside and then rage once more? Nothing in my mother's visions is ever what it appears to be. Think on this."

On second thought, maybe you're not that helpful after all. "What about the small, machine-like child... Bates?"

She nodded, "Yes, that one is obvious. She saw him because he plays such a large role in their fate." *Fair enough... can't deny that.*

"What of the flame that consumed a wheat field and a pool of water?" If Raven could make any sense of that then I truly would be impressed.

She frowned slightly, "I'm not sure what that represents, but I know

that fire, in her visions, often represents magick. And the water, you say, quenched it? Or did the flame burn itself out?"

Hell if I know. "There was one last part to her visions of the Black Mountain Clan. A dark place, with a dark fire... and a mirrored plain."

"And did you say that the Black Mountain Clan was near this flame?"
Odd. Yes, the whole damn thing is odd. I'm glad I'm not the only one that thinks so. "She also had visions of M'in Gorad. An eyeless man, in pain, carving a key... a wolf with a raised paw... now that I think about it, that's probably related to Caladon..."

She nodded, "What the screaming man and his key represent I have no idea, but you're right on the other part... the official symbol for the city of Caladon is a wolf with one paw raised in the air."

Finally it seemed like we'd found something amidst all the nonsense.
"Perhaps we need to begin our search there, Raven."

She frowned, "I'm not so sure. Remember, my mother's visions are shackled by neither our eyes nor our time... the events she describes might be in either the future or the past... let's look at all she's said before we go any further..." Perhaps I was being too eager to return home. My mind had leapt at the sudden conclusion.

I started grumbling. She was right, of course, I was just annoyed about the whole thing. "All right. Her next vision was of a torn curtain... a ringed, broken finger pointing east..."

"There's something about that entire vision which pulls at my memory...especially the ring. I'll think about it further...."

You could, you know, share your thoughts instead of being half as cryptic as your damned mother. Ugh. "A hand that sees, but is blind... a truthful man in a mask... Wait! That sounds like the symbol on an amulet I've seen."

Raven inhaled deeply, suddenly concerned, "Interesting. That's the ancient symbol of the Molochean Hand. You say you know of it?"

I nodded, "Yes... they were an ancient order of assassins."

She stared at me intently, explaining it to me further, "The Molochean Hand were assassins for what used to be known as the Derian-Ka... the ancient Order of the Dead. The Derian-Ka were a shadowy group who formed during the Age of Legends. Their membership, and their agenda, were always very secret. I know little about them, beyond the most cursory of knowledge, but there have always been rumors about who they were, and what they were doing..."

I was terribly interested in anything she had to say on the subject considering just how personally I was involved in it. "And their connection to the Molochean Hand?"

He garbles

"My mother told me about the Hand. It was rejected from the Order of the Dead on grounds of doctrinal differences."

I scoffed in annoyance, "These amulets and the attempts on my life might say different."

She frowned and stared at the wooden platform for a moment, "I agree... but I don't know why they would be involved in this business. Very interesting..."

Interesting to you, perhaps, but regrettably serious for me. I suppose it's a whole lot more of a bloody curiosity when you aren't their target. "Let's get back to the topic at hand, I suppose. What do you think the vision itself means?"

"I don't really know, although it would seem that perhaps they are being mislead..." I remembered the book that Joachim had left in the Stillwater inn, and my conversation with Virgil about the Hand being 'not all bad'. Combined with this vision it was certainly an interesting idea. "Blindness in my mother's visions is sometimes associated with deception. As far as the man in the mask who is draped in truth? I have no idea..."

That makes two of us, dear girl. "What about the last part? Lost, hiding children... a man runs from them and drops leaves..."

At last she let out a great sigh as if what she was about to say would lift a great weight from her shoulders. A weight, I expected, that

would suddenly fall upon me. "This one is most interesting of all. And it seems that my fears may very well have been correct..."

"Do you remember when I told you that the name of M'in Gorad bothered me in some way? Well, I believe that may have been so because M'in Gorad is a DARK name...."

I don't think I like where this is going one bit. "I'm almost afraid to ask. What does that mean, a dark name?"

Her eyes stared straight into mine and she spoke terribly clearly. She was dead serious. "A Dark Elf name. Do you know of the Dark Elves?"

I had read about their possible existence, certainly, but it had only been a categorization... a method by which the author of the book distinguished between various elves he met based on their attitudes towards him. It seemed awfully prejudiced, but the way Raven spoke about it seemed like he may have been on to something. "I've heard very little of them... could you elaborate?" *Looks like that book was on to something after all, then.*

She leaned up against the massive, hollowed out tree and began explaining, "It's a long story, but sometime during the Age of Legends, many years before even my mother was born, there were a group of elves who separated themselves... there were philosophical differences, and they were no longer welcome in our forests... those elves became what we know as the Dark Elves..."

Although I was interested in what she had to say about the Dark Elves, I also didn't want to pass up the opportunity for a unique point of view. After all, that was one of the simple pleasures I indulged in throughout my journey. It kept me going when I most wanted to give up and just go home. "I've spoken with a Panarii priest about the Age of Legends before, but if you don't mind I would like to hear an explanation of it from an elven point of view. Humans tend to have rather different opinions on history, for obvious reasons."

"There was an age that ruled over all of the races, and magick was a LARGE part of everyone's lives. It was the Age of Legends, a time of great power and also of great evil."

"I see... thank you, Raven. Now back to the differences between you and the Dark Elves...?" I hoped I didn't interrupt her too badly. She didn't really seem to mind. The Raven I was talking to now was a

whole lot more agreeable than the one I'd first met, but I supposed I looked quite different in her eyes now as well.

She paused, thinking of where she left off, then continued, "They believe that this world, and ALL of its races, are subject to elven rule. They believe that elves are superior because of our close connection to nature, our power in the ways of magick, the longevity of our physical form. They see the other races as bumbling children who need our guidance, regardless of its severity.

"The elves of Quintarra, on the other hand... in fact ALL other elves, believe that everything and every one has a rightful place in the experience which forms this reality. Elves feel that very little, if anything, ever happens that isn't part of the natural progression of that state. They feel no superiority because of their... advantages... that is just the role they have been picked to play..."

While it may have been true that elves had a number of physical and magickal advantages, I couldn't help but feel somewhat insulted at her arrogance. I felt silly, then, for being insulted that elves were elves. "What about Dark Elves, then? Do other elves see them as a violation of the natural order?"

"Unfortunately not. The Dark Elves are seen in the same light as everyone else...they have thier role and they are playing it."

I detected the slightest hint of anger in her voice and in the way she stood in that moment. "'Unfortunately'? Do you believe differently, Raven?"

Her face became like stone, unwilling to give out any further information. "I believe... well, let us say that I don't always see eye to eye with those in Quintarra concerning the 'rightful' place of the Dark Elves. MY role here is as protector. I will do so, regardless of the cost."

I suppose I shouldn't be surprised that, for all her willingness to discuss her mother's visions, she doesn't want to tell me anything of herself. "Let's get back to your mother's visions, then."

She nodded, "My mother's vision of the lost children was referring, I believe, to the Dark Elves. They were hidden from her because they

are hidden from ALL of us... through magick and isolation, we've not seen where they live for almost 500 years..."

It did make a certain sense, though it struck me as strange that they could hide out from even the Silver Lady for such an incredible length of time. I supposed it was only my human view of things that made it seem like such a long time, however. "What about the man... who was the man running from them?"

He garbles

"He went into the forest to study the elves, and I remember that he was very interested in the Dark Elves."

Now that's news to me. Why have I not heard of this?! "Who was he?"

She glared at me as though I'd been interrupting. "As I said... he was a researcher... a strange little man, a bit overdressed, but kind-hearted and very intelligent... I was young then, a mere 160 years old... he was the first human I'd ever seen..." she stared off into the space behind me, her eyes drifting off into nothing and a smile slowly forming on her lips.

There's obviously more to this man than you're letting on, and of course I'll be damned if you're willing to tell me about it. "Do you remember his name?"

Her eyes snapped back into focus as she suddenly remembered my presence. "His name... it was long ago, but I remember because he said it so often... I think humans just like hearing the sound of their own names." She laughed a bit as the memory washed over her. "Terwilliger... Dr. Renford A. Terwilliger. I can hear him saying it even now." She laughed some more as she thought on it.

As much as you try to hide information about yourself, you certainly do reveal quite a bit of it with your body language, dear girl. Deception is not your strong suit. "What were the 'leaves' he was dropping?"

"I don't know. It almost seemed in the vision, that the 'flock' who consumed him were more intresteted in the leaves...and my mother even said to find what was left behind...these 'leaves' might very well be what are we looking for...."

Leaves... leaves... leaves... nope, not ringing a bell. Who the hell paints leaves? "What is the place of smoke and water?"

Raven shrugged helplessly, "She could mean almost anywhere, but if I were to make a guess I'd say she was talking about the human city of Tarant. It lies in the Gulf of Morbihan, and its... what do you call them... factories? They are always belching smoke into the skies. That, and..." she winked at me and a sly grin spread across her face, "I know that Terwilliger was from there."

It must be nice to have such untarnished memories of the past... or at least to be so distant from them that they do not hopelessly bind up your thoughts and your actions. It makes me long for the lifespan of an elf, for everything to be so much less... immediate. "Well, what now? All of these visions are fine and dandy, but I haven't a damned clue where to start."

She stared at me intently, "You have a place to begin your search, my friend." *Friend? Have I really improved that much in your eyes?* I supposed I should have been grateful that she was willing to so severely reconsider her initial opinion of me. "It would seem that if you need to find this M'in Gorad, you're going to need to find the village of Dark Elves. The only person who may know where they are is Renford A. Terwilliger. He may or may not be in Tarant, but it's a good place to start looking..."

May or may not? I don't know how old you are now, but when 'young' is 'a mere 160 years old' I have a hard time imagining your childhood crush is still alive. "Then I will find the Dark Elves. To Tarant I shall go..." Raven stared at me and shook my hand.

He garbles

"Only those like you can see this."

As flattered as I was, I didn't feel I particularly deserved any kind of admiration. My path was not an enviable nor a respectable one, it was just my own and I walked it as best I could. "I'm no hero... I just want people to stop trying to kill me. I want to go home." My heart sank as I said the words aloud and realized just how true they were. I missed Frederick terribly.

Raven slowly stopped shaking my hand and dropped it, looking away briefly. "Perhaps I misjudged you... but no matter. Your actions, however they are motivated, are noble. Good luck. Return to me

when you've found the dark elves, and tell me what you've discovered."

I nodded, "Very well. I'll return when I know more... good bye, Raven." I turned and I walked across the bridge leading to the platform.

Vollinger let out a great sigh as we walked, "Now THAT was a heavy bit of conversation, wasn't it? All those strange visions and interpretations, and now this business with the dark elves? You're dragging me along on quite the journey, Samantha."

I chuckled at him a bit. "Yes, I am, aren't I? Are you saying you're beginning to tire of it?"

"Not in the least," he smiled, "actually, I rather enjoy your company. You're an interesting woman, I'll give you that. I guarantee there isn't another like you the whole world over."

I sighed, "I can't tell if that's an honest compliment or not. You're right, of course... I don't know of many women that carry an axe around and use it to defend themselves from an ancient order of assassins."

Terry let out a muted woof and Virgil clapped me on the shoulder lightly, "I'm pretty sure that's meant to be a compliment, Samantha. Honestly... I... consider you to be a friend. If that's all right with you. I mean, you're important to the Panarii as well, but..."

"Oh shut it, Virgil," I smiled at him, "I'm honored to consider you a friend. I don't care about the prophecy one way or another. As the Lady said, does it really matter in the end who somebody pointed a finger at?"

He sighed dejectedly, "I suppose not, I just... nevermind. I'll respect your opinion... as a friend."

I clapped him on the shoulder as well, still smiling, "And I'll respect yours as well, Virgil. I mean no offense to the Panarii, I just don't think the prophecy really matters at this point. Let's... let's just get to

Tarant, shall we?"

"Tarant?!" an unfamiliar voice shouted out. A scrawny little elf skittered out in front of me and held out her hands. "You said you're going to Tarant? Pardon... my name is Swyft. Would you perhaps be interested in some work as a guide?"

I looked at Virgil and Vollinger uncomfortably, but neither seemed to have any helpful input. "Er, what exactly did you have in mind?"

"I will pay you 300 coins to bring me safely to Tarant."

"I suppose that sounds agreeable enough... I am headed that way anyway."

She started bouncing up and down and then hugged me, all the while shouting, "Yay! I get to go to Tarant! I am so excited!"

Something is not right here. "Um... just how old are you, anyway?"

She put her hands on her hips and glared at me, "I am 150 years old. What does that matter?"

Erk. "Isn't that just a tad young for an elf to be out on her own?" In human years she was probably closer to the age of 12 or 13, which wouldn't be a problem for some but she obviously had been rather sheltered. Tarant would certainly be a rude awakening for her.

She practically shouted at me in response, "What are you trying to say?! I am mature enough to make my own decision!"

Right. Of course you are. "I am sure. Are you ready to go?"

"Yes!" she shouted, skipping alongside me happily.



Great. Well, whatever. It'll be 300 more coins than I had before and I just have to babysit a child for a couple weeks on the journey back. Virgil glared at me with uncertainty and pain in his eyes, and I was quite well aware that it had nothing to do with our prior conversation. Sorry, friend. I just can't pass up easy coin.

I made for Stillwater, intending to stop there for a quick rest after the trip over the mountains and before heading down to Tarant. It was only a slight bit out of the way and resting in a proper bed would do me some good.

Chapter the Forty Second: Not All Good News Is Welcome

Upon entering Stillwater I passed by a lonely shack on the outskirts of the town. Normally it would've escaped my notice, as it likely had on my way out, when I left for Qintarra, but my attention was drawn to it by rampant shouting and cursing. I curiously cracked open the loose door and poked my head inside.

The noise was coming from an older man who sat alone, staring at the floor or the wall or nothing in particular. He couldn't actually be staring as his eyes had very obviously been cut out, likely by a heavy blade from the looks of it. He turned in my direction as the door swung open further, "Halt! Don't you know I can smell your presence, foolish one?! You actually thought you were capable of catching me unaware, didn't you? Who are you?!"

"I am known as Samantha Colburn." *Sammy, Sammy, son of...* Merle whored me out for four long years, though looking back on it now it seemed so much longer at the time. At long last I found salvation where I least expected it... a 'client' of mine noticed his things missing and reported me to the guards, at once damning me and exposing Merle. I was locked up and I was glad for it.

"Why have you come to bother an old, blind man, Samantha Colburn? Did he send you to finish me off? Did he?!" He was ranting just as loudly as he was when he thought nobody was around to hear.

"N-no..." I tried to calm him, "I don't know anything about-" I was cut off.

"He has never found me, you know... he never will! Not me! The Master of dodge is too crafty for the likes of Stout! ...never, never, never..." His ranting continued, seemingly without skipping a beat.

I swallowed uncomfortably. "Adkin Chambers... the Dodge Master." It was more of a statement than a question.

"Who told you that! What do you know? I thought you knew nothing... and now you have my name. Liar! I am still the best... you shall not kill me!"

You're really starting to get on my nerves, old man, and that's saying a lot considering just how sorry for you I feel. "I am seeking you, but for training, no other purpose."

"Liar!" He shouted angrily, "He sent you to finish me off! Didn't he?! It wasn't enough that he stole Druella, was it?! Or that he blinded me and left me for dead?"

I sighed, putting a hand to my head impatiently. "No, sir. I only came seeking your wisdom as a trainer."

"You expect me to believe that you have sought out an old, blind man to complete your Master dodge training? What a fool you must think me to be!" He laughed hoarsely. The strain in his voice showed that his rants likely occurred somewhat frequently.

I didn't know how many times I would have to tell the old fool, but his screaming at me certainly didn't change the very real fact in front of him. I really had no desire to kill him no matter how much he annoyed me, and training would be a pleasant benefit. "It is true, sir. There is no reason, aside from training."

He said sarcastically

"How shall I ascertain your level of wisdom in the art of dodge? If you are truly well versed, you will be able to anticipate THIS....."

He suddenly launches his arm forward to strike me

"What the-?" he caught me off guard striking out directly towards my face. I was too fast for him, though. I dashed aside and within moments my axe was in my hand almost by reflex. Terry started growling.

The old man seemed somehow satisfied at this, "I see you have reached Expert status in our skill..."

I grumbled, "I told you I was only seeking training!"

"Ha! Fine!" He sounded just as angry as he had been when I first started talking to him. "I shall 'believe' you. If Master training is what you truly seek, I have a task you must complete before I will disclose my secrets to you."

As long as it doesn't involve making imprints of my naked backside in the snow, you've got a deal. "What must I do to prove my skill?"

"Death, you want death! Kill Sir Garrick Stout, the Master of Melee! Ha! Ha! There! Prove he is not your master, and then I shall reward you with training!"

You know, when I told Mr. Ogg that Stout would get what was coming to him, I didn't mean that I would be the one to give it to him. "What purpose would his death serve you?" Everybody's so damned obsessed with killing.

Chambers was furious, "Why should he die? WHY SHOULD HE DIE?! For destroying my life and blinding me, you fool! Druella was mine! Mine, I say! He knew it, knew she loved me... That's why he wanted her for himself!"

Yes, I realize he blinded you... that still doesn't answer how revenge will actually improve your life. "He blinded you over a woman, then?"

He grumbled angrily, "He and I had always been at odds with one another. But then he challenged me to a duel for her hand. I was infuriated! The pompous pig! Proud I was, so I accepted, even against her protests... Little did I know how truly obsessed with Druella he had become."

I think you're not really allowed to talk about obsession, old man. "How is it that you were blinded, but not killed?"

"I made a miscalculation, and he had me. I yielded, yet he pressed on... he attempted to force me to expound his prowess as a fighter. When I refused, he told me that he would make sure I never thought I was his equal again. Then he blinded me with his sword. The last sound I heard as the pain took my consciousness was Druella's scream."

"What happened then?" I did tire of Chambers' rambling, but I was morbidly curious about his story.

He suddenly grew excited, grabbing at my hands to hold them, "As I healed in an infirmary, disfigured and blind, my hatred for Stout grew into an unquenchable thirst. It consumes my every waking moment. You are the tool that has been sent to me. You shall be my eyes!"

I do suppose that if anybody deserves a good killing it's Stout. I can only feel so bad about killing a man like that, and I really could use the training. "Very well, Adkin Chambers. I will seek vengeance in your name if that pleases you." I was still disgusted, but I was willing to make this one exception.

Chambers started laughing darkly, a deep and hoarse laugh that spiraled upward with glee. "Bring me his eyes! That will be the proof of his death that I require!"

Fitting, I suppose. "I will do this deed. If I may, however, would you tell me what happened to Druella?"

"I've heard rumors that Druella had escaped his clutches; it is the only thought of pleasure that exists in my life. Perhaps you shall locate her in your travels. I would welcome news of her if you come by it."

He suddenly reverts back to his obsession...

"He shall finally pay for destroying our life, Druella, my love. He shall finally pay... GO! Eliminate the demon known as Garrick Stout and return his eyes to me!"

Yes, yes, I know already. Ugh. "I go!" I said, rolling my eyes. Virgil actually looked somewhat scared.

He approached me as we walked towards the inn to grab our room for the evening. "Samantha... are you quite sure about this? I really didn't expect you to accept."

I nodded slowly, "I think so, yes. I'm not comfortable with it, and certainly this Stout should be a more than formidable opponent... but at the same time, it seems to be a shame that a man like that continues living, don't you agree? I think that Arcanum would be better off without him."

Virgil smirked at me slightly, "Yes, I would agree with that

assessment. I'm actually proud of you. You've come a long way since we first met."

We were already at the inn and I was about to pay for our rooms, "Oh, stop it, Virgil. This really isn't something to be proud of, even if I can loosely justify it."

He sighed sadly and I handed the appropriate amount of coin over to the innkeeper. I slept fitfully, somewhat upset with myself over having accepted Chambers' terms. In the morning we all left for Tarant. Swyft was, of course, excited as a schoolgirl. I actually envied her innocence.

The journey to Tarant passed quickly enough, although most of us were uncomfortably silent due to the new addition to the group. Thankfully (or perhaps not) Swyft was more than happy to fill the silence with meaningless banter on any and every subject she could possibly think of. Hearing about things first-hand was one thing, but hearing childish stories from a spoiled elf didn't satisfy my thirst for knowledge at all. I was quite incredibly pleased when we finally reached Tarant so I could at last be rid of her.

"Thank you for bringing me here. I suppose I'll be on my way. Here's the coin I promised you."

"Thank you. I'll be seeing you." I smiled and waved and walked off as quickly as possible, my smile fading the moment she was out of sight. I looked over at the others, "...I am so sorry."

Vollinger chuckled out loud and Virgil let out a huge sigh, "At least she's gone... and I suppose more coin is always a good thing."

"I've got a great way to make it up to the both of you, though." I looked down and tossed a piece of jerky to Terry. "...and, of course, Terry, but he's easy to please." Virgil arched an eyebrow at me and I continued my explanation. "Now I know you're not as interested in archaeology as I am, but... would you be interested in seeing the insides of an ancient iron chest that's never been opened?"

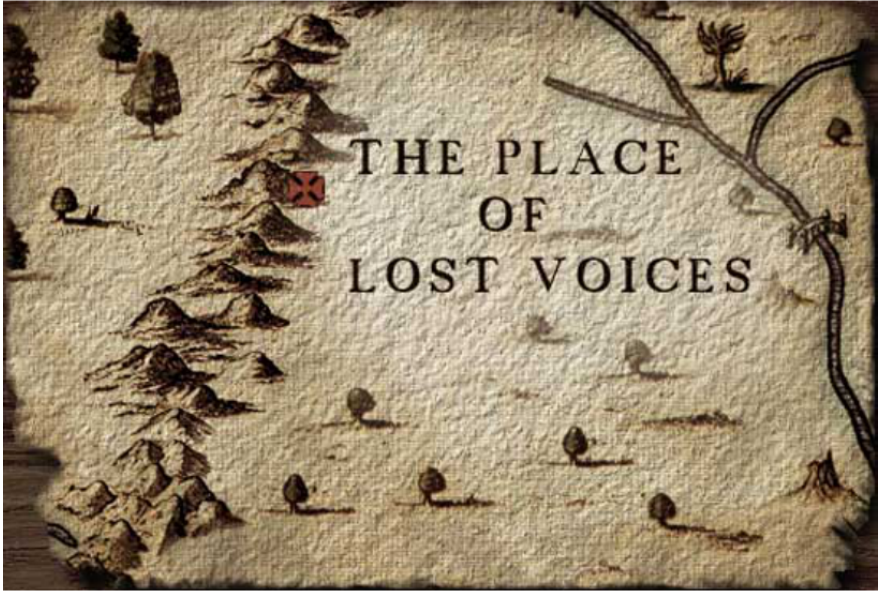
Virgil's mouth dropped open. "What? You mean in the zoological society? I thought you already tried picking that lock."

"I did," I nodded satisfactorily, holding up the key I made out of mithril and heartstone, "and that's why I know this key is the one that'll work."

Vollinger grinned, "That's quite impressive, Samantha. You truly are a learned individual."

I gave a light curtsy and dashed excitedly into the zoological society. I carefully stared back towards the rear wall of the building, making sure the woman behind the desk wasn't looking my way, then I stepped over the divider in the way of the iron chest and slipped the key inside. I turned it with a satisfactory 'click' and, as quietly as I could, pulled the chest open. Much to my surprise it actually didn't make a single creak despite its age.

Inside I discovered a small map alongside three round drums with peculiar shapes inscribed on them. I quickly emptied the chest and stuffed the contents into my purse, shutting the chest as quietly as I could. I stepped back over the divider and glanced towards the back of the building again, making sure the woman behind the desk was none the wiser. I thought about taking my key with me, but I knew it would be useless from then on. I left it, wondering how long it would take them to discover the chest had been robbed. I felt as though I was depriving them of one mystery while instantly providing them with another.



Outside, I took a closer look at the small map. It was unmistakably showing the stretch of land from around the area of Stillwater going South along the river nearly to Tarant. It noted a particular location along the Stonewall Mountains, just North of the Stonecutter Clan caverns. Virgil looked on at the map as I stared at it, clapping me on the shoulder, "Well done, Samantha! This is... this is amazing!"

I grinned at him, "Truly it is, isn't it? I can't wait to see what we find. I'd like it if we headed there as soon as we finished our business here in Tarant."

"Well?" he asked excitedly, "What's keeping us? We just need to find out information about Renford A. Terwilliger, don't we?"

I nodded, "That's correct... and the hall of records isn't far from here, either. Why don't we go take a look?"

Without even answering Virgil took off towards the hall of records and I ran after him, laughing. It had been so long since anybody shared my interest in history that it was truly a pleasure to have Virgil all excited over it. I ran into the hall of records after him, slowing only once I got to the stairs down. I approached the woman downstairs and asked, "Excuse me... could you find me the obituary for Renford A. Terwilliger?"

"Certainly..." she said, thumbing through a massive stack of papers. "Ah, yes... here we are. Ahem... "Renford A. Terwilliger, author of 'T'sen-Ang: Horror Among the Dark Elves,' was found dead in his home today. His death appears to have occurred under mysterious circumstances. The authorities are calling for further investigation." Oh my, what a dreadful incident."

A book? That sounds promising. "Thank you for the information, madam." I returned to the outer hallway, thinking about the book when an idea rather suddenly struck me. Although I hadn't seen it previously it occurred to me the library might have a copy, and I did purchase that membership many months prior. I climbed back up the stairs with purpose, thankful that everything of an intellectual sort was neatly organized all in one place. I entered the library, showing my membership to the gentleman that greeted me as I entered. "Good day, sir. I'm looking for T'sen-Ang: Horror among the Dark Elves. Do you have it?"

"Sounds spooky," he exclaimed, smiling. "I'll just go and check. I'll be right back, madam." He wandered around the shelves for a couple short minutes, searching for my book. Finally he plucked a single volume from a shelf and returned to me.

"I am sorry, madam. But I was not able to find "T'sen-Ang: Horror

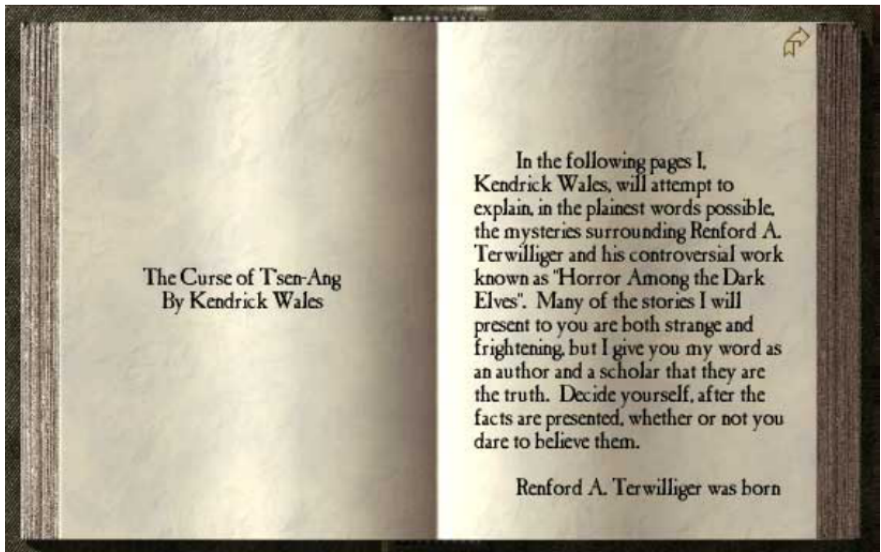
Among the Dark Elves." However, I did find another book that may be of interest to you."

Of course it's never that easy. Well, perhaps this other book will do. "What book would that be?"

He put on a pair of spectacles and glanced at the front page of the book carefully, "The book is titled Curse of T'sen-Ang. It appears to be a book about the one you are searching for."

A book about a book? Well, I suppose there are weirder things. "Sounds interesting. I would like to check it out if I may."

"Yes, of course madam." He handed the book to me and I immediately cracked it open, entirely too curious about the contents.



in 1750. His fabled trip to the Glimmering Forest was made in 1768, his eighteenth year. He was indeed, as per his book, accompanied by an elven tracker named Jar'en Ben'al; records housed within the Tarantian Zoological Society validate this fact. Mr. Ben'al was never heard from nor seen again after the expedition.

As for Mr. Terwilliger's account of his adventures in the elven city of

Qintarra, or his supposed discovery of the mythical T'sen-Ang, no one can be sure. Most scholars and collectors of literature assume that Mr. Terwilliger's book is a work of fiction. And as such fantastical literature was all the rage at that time, I might be inclined to agree. Yet one must only look upon the events following the publication of "Horror Among the Dark Elves" to see that he very well may have found something deep within the Glimmering that was never, ever meant to be found.

There were very few copies of the book ever published. Records concerning the initial print run are scarce, but it is believed that no more than 100 were ever released to the public. 4 days after the book was shipped to Tarantian bookstores, the factory that printed it was burned to the ground. The owner, a Mr. Jeremiah Gomes, was found in his home, brutally murdered by an unknown assailant.

The four bookstores that had purchased the volume for sale in Tarant suffered the same fate. Only fifteen copies of the book were sold before the final store was destroyed.

Those fifteen copies became an immediate collector's item. Enormous sums of money were paid for the remaining volumes. After a few months, the books had fallen into various, respected collections across Arcanum.

Each and every one of the owners of the books began to complain of strange happenings once the book was in their possession. All of them told of frightening noises and visions, shadowy figures following them wherever they went, unexplained illnesses and untimely deaths. Many attributed this to paranoia, a trite brand of sensationalism to create an even greater demand for the book. Unfortunately, their fears were all too justified. All of them were dead within 5 years of the initial publication, their volumes either stolen, burned or disfigured beyond recognition.

Indeed, they had suffered what came to be known as the Curse of T'sen-Ang.

Mr. Terwilliger, strangely enough, lived a relatively long life, cursed, in his own way, to witness the evil fruits of his labors. He saw himself as the cause of these horrors, and wrote extensively of it within his memoirs. The following is an excerpt from them, only days before he died in his sleep.

"I will never forgive myself for what I have unleashed upon the world. Had I the courage, I would travel again to the Glimmering and unleash holy vengeance upon those evil creatures that have plagued our fair land and its peoples. Alas, I no longer have the strength nor the power, and now there is only my own end that I pray for every day."

Until just a few short months ago, it was thought that there were no remaining copies of "Horror Among the Dark Elves". After an exhaustive investigation, I have found that this is not at all the case. The last known copy of the book, owned by the famed book collector Mr. Phillip Misk, was thought to have perished with its owner in a fire almost 50 years ago. Now, with new evidence presented by a reliable source, I have discovered that Mr. Misk's son, Victor Misk of Caladon, still has the copy in his possession and is hiding it for fear that the curse will again visit his family.

I pray that the evil let loose in the Glimmering has finally been put to rest. And I pray Mr. Misk and his family avoid the fate that has befallen every other soul who has challenged the Curse of T'sen-Ang.

I was completely stunned by what I had read. At first I was frightened, naturally. I knew that the book I was trying to locate was no work of fiction and, indeed, the events surrounding it only served to confirm that fact. I'd managed to avoid an untimely death so far, however, and that was not for their lack of effort.

What bothered me perhaps most of all was the collector said to have the only remaining copy: one Mr. Victor Misk. He'd been a friendly rival of Frederick's, both of them collectors of various things. It shouldn't have surprised me at all that he, of all people, was the one to have the book. What instead bothered me was that my journey would now take me to Caladon. I'd been longing to go home once again after so much time had passed, and now that chance was upon me. I didn't know whether to be ecstatic or frightened, and in truth it was a little bit of both. *Frederick... I'm coming home.* My only obstacle was finding out exactly how to get there.

"Ha! Ha! Good one, Smyth! Jolly good, Willoughsby, old boy!" Some rather boisterous men burst out of a nearby door as I passed by, shouting something or other. I mostly ignored it, but I did catch the name 'Willoughsby'. *Where have I heard that name before... of course...!*

That's the gnome trying to get Caladon into the Unified Kingdoms!

If anybody would be able to secure me passage to Caladon in these troubled times it would be him. "Mr. Willoughsby!" I called out, "Excuse me, sir, might I have a moment...?"

He smiled at me and shook my hand. "I'd be more than happy to speak with you, young lady." *Isn't he a charmer?* "I'm always eager to hear the thoughts and opinions of my constituents. Unfortunately, I have a pressing engagement just now. Will you stop by my offices in City Hall in an hour or so and we can speak further...?"

I nodded, shaking his hand back. "I may just do that. Good day to you." He wandered off down the street, presumably towards the engagement he'd been speaking of.

"Now why would you want to talk with a man like that?" Virgil didn't seem to quite understand my motives.

"Well..." I tried to explain, "It's going to be rather difficult to secure passage to Caladon without that man's blessing. Some people around these parts are talking about war. War! I think we'd be better off trying to deal with somebody like Willoughsby than we would bribing some questionable sea captain who'd wind up burying us at Razor's Point, don't you?"

I could hear his chuckle echoing throughout his plate armor. "You have a point, Samantha. You're one step ahead of things, as always. I suppose chatting with him might be a good idea after all."

Vollinger was chuckling as well, "So now it's Caladon, is it? Where to after that? Thanatos? Tulla? We certainly are making a rather thorough tour of the world."

"Come now, Vollinger," I chided, "You know you enjoy it just as much as I do."

"Yes, you've got me there. That I do," he admitted with a smile.

The three of us chatted as we strolled around the streets of Tarant absent-mindedly and, eventually, I headed in the direction of City

Hall. As luck would have it, Mr. Willoughsby seemed to be in by the time I arrived. "Hello again, Mr. Willoughsby. Do you have time to chat now?"

"Why, yes. I do enjoy conversations with my constituents. Lifeblood of the city, and all of that.... do you know anything of politics here in Tarant, young lady?"

I decided it would be for the best if I played entirely ignorant. There was something about the personality of the gnome that struck me oddly and if he was going to assume I was just another ignorant Tarantian woman I wasn't going to do anything to change that assumption. "No. Might we speak of them?"

He chatted away at me as if he truly enjoyed it, something I expected he would've been significantly less inclined to do had he known I was a citizen of Caladon. However, I most certainly wasn't one of Caladon's favored citizens. Tolerated might have been a better word. "Tarant is ruled by the Tarantian Industrial Council, of which I am the Chairman. We are a group of businessmen and politicians who make laws based upon what we feel is best for both the commercial and," he suddenly cleared his throat uncomfortably before continuing, "uh... cultural future of our fair city..."

"Has Tarant always been ruled as such, or was there once a king?"
Well, that was awful direct... I'd best be more careful before I tip him off...

Willoughsby didn't seem too suspicious just yet. "No. The monarchy... well, how should one phrase it? ...became, uh, 'outdated' about 50 years ago. We don't speak of it much here in Tarant." *Why so nervous, Willoughsby? Do you know something that you aren't letting on?* I resolved to think on the gnome's strange behavior later, at a time when it wouldn't cause me to blurt out inappropriate questions. "Suffice it to say that the city has prospered under our new system of government. Do you know of the Unified Kingdom, friend?"

What kind of bloody idiot doesn't know about the Unified Kingdom? Caladon's not even a member and I know of it. Are Tarantians really that stupid? "No... what is the Unified Kingdom?"

"The Unified Kingdom is an alliance of two major kingdoms... those of Tarant and Ashbury. We share trade resources and military strength. And there are many cities that are currently looking into

joining the Unified Kingdom. Negotiations with prospective members are a part of my job..."

Looks like I'm playing the part of the local citizen quite well so far. "Say, Mr. Willoughsby... what, in your opinion, are the major problems in Tarant?"

He thought about my question earnestly before answering, "Oh... we've many problems here in Tarant. The rise of criminal activity in the Boil is one of them. I'm taking... uh, personal measures... to alleviate that problem. We've also a rising orcish and half-orcish population here in Tarant... they've created... UNIONS" He said the word with such incredible distaste that I thought he was going to be sick. "...and have caused a general unrest among the laborers here in the city."

I'd passed through the Boil more than a few times on my way in and out of the city and I couldn't say I blamed him for wanting to turn some attention towards it. "I'd be interested in hearing about those 'personal measures' you're taking in the Boil."

Willoughsby's face started to grow a bit red and he turned away from me slightly, clearing his throat, "Oh, nothing... let's forget I ever said it."

I winked at him slyly and said, "Come now, Willoughsby old boy. You can trust me..."

He chuckles.

"Indeed, perhaps you are someone I should bring into my confidence. I have a man who I use in these matters. I've contracted him to, uh, take care of things in the Boil. If you're the sort of woman who's interested in assisting in that sort of endeavor, have a drink at Caleb Malloy's in the Boil."

Hmm... I suppose if I want to hear more about that I'll have to pay this Sebastian a visit. "Very well, then. What does your job entail, exactly?"

He seemed taken aback at my question. "My job? Oh... I've many responsibilities being chairman of the Industrial Council as well as the owner of my own considerable enterprises." Leave it to a gnome to brag about his financial success. "As of late I've been monitoring the negotiations with Caladon. Caladon, you see, is considering

becoming a member of the Unified Kingdom."

Yes, now that's the subject I was digging for. "Really? Have they agreed to do so already?"

Willoughsby shook his head sadly, "No... we've hit a barrier in the negotiations, and we're not quite sure what to do... we're in desperate need of a skilled diplomat to approach the King's advisors with our newest proposals, and to make sure that their decision is to recommend Caladon join us. We're having trouble finding a person with the skills to successfully do so..."

I grinned widely at him. *Oh now this is almost too good to be true.* "You know, that I think I might be able to help with..."

"Hmmm. Perhaps you might be the woman that we're looking for. I can't emphasize enough the sensitivity of these negotiations... The individual we choose must be well-versed in all of the issues involved, as well as being skilled in the arts of education and compromise. Do you think you have the qualities necessary, my friend?"

All that plus a healthy bias towards my homeland of Caladon. "I'm confident that I'll be up to the task. What needs to be done?"

Willoughsby nodded thoughtfully, and I could tell he was starting to change his mindset from that of a polite conversation to a more calculating, business conversation. "I see. Well, perhaps I will send you, if you're acceptable of my terms. You will be paid a sum equal to your performance, if in fact you are successful in convincing the King's advisors to agree to membership in the Unified Kingdom. If I find your performance acceptable, I will also train you to be a Master in the persuasive arts..."

Blast! I could leave his money, but training is hard to pass up... practice is only getting me so far... "And how will my 'performance' be rated, sir?"

He sighed, shuffling through a desk drawer as he continued speaking, "Well, in any negotiation there is compromise. You will be given a dossier which outlines the articles of membership in the Unified Kingdom. The less you have to compromise on those articles, the more money you will be paid. Are we clear?"

Money, training, transportation to Caladon, and the chance to influence this historic moment? "Done."

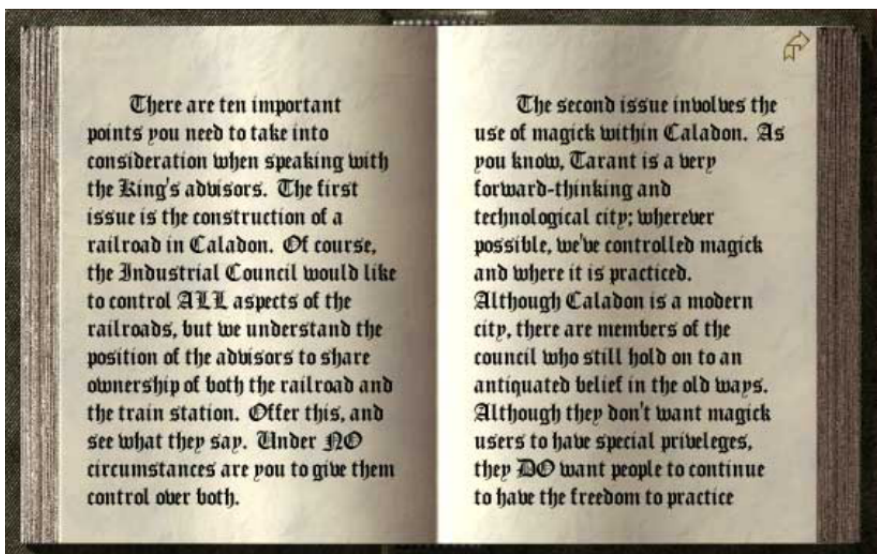
He smiled broadly, "I'm glad you've agreed to do so. I'll arrange for a boat to take you to Caladon from Black Root. When you arrive you're to meet a man outside of the Royal Castle by the name of Renard. He will counsel you just before the negotiations."

It's been a particularly fruitful conversation, Mr. Willoughsby. "Was there anything else?"

"Here is the dossier I mentioned. Read it carefully... you will need to know it intimately before the meeting with the King's advisors. Renard will tell you where to meet me once the negotiations are done. And remember... these negotiations are very sensitive. Speak to NO ONE about them... understood?"

"Of course, Mr. Willoughsby. I've some business to finish up on this side of the world and then I'll be on my way to Black Root." I smiled at him warmly.

"Yes, of course. Take your time, madam. After all, you're the star of this show." He and I shook hands briefly and then I left his office. I stood just outside the door and opened up the dossier he gave me, wanting to read what I was supposed to do so I would have time to think about which points I actually cared to consider and which I would ignore utterly.



There are ten important points you need to take into consideration when speaking with the King's advisors. The first issue is the construction of a railroad in Caladon. Of course, the Industrial Council would like to control ALL aspects of the railroads, but we understand the position of the advisors to share ownership of both the railroad and the train station. Offer this, and see what they say. Under NO circumstances are you to give them control over both.

The second issue involves the use of magick within Caladon. As you know, Tarant is a very forward-thinking and technological city; wherever possible, we've controlled magick and where it is practiced. Although Caladon is a modern city, there are members of the council who still hold on to an antiquated belief in the old ways. Although they don't want magick users to have special privileges, they DO want people to continue to have the freedom to practice

magick. A moderate stance on this issue is recommended.

One of the more delicate issues in the negotiations will be the status of the Bates Steam Engine Company. The advisors understand the importance of technology, and are very excited about the possibility of the Bates Company opening a factory there, BUT, they are also concerned about the domination by Bates of their own companies, and so are leery about

giving Bates trade priveleges. You should recommend that Bates be given LIMITED trade concessions within Caladon, but not unlimited freedoms. On the other hand, they don't want anything in the agreement that would deter the Bates Company from developing in Caladon, so be very careful about what the terms of this agreement are.

The status of the Caladonian Military is a VERY important issue, both to us, and to them. We, of course, would like a full dismantling of their military, but it would take a skilled negotiator convince them of that. According to intelligence, the advisors would prefer that half of their military is sent to the Unified Batallions, which is in line with standard Unified Kingdom membership practices. The advisors will be happy about this because they spend less on defense, but don't fully leave themselves vulnerable. They DO NOT want to keep a full, standing army and navy. Be careful when speaking of these issues...the success of the negotiations might hinge on it.

The Unified Kingdom membership tax is usually a closed issue. But, considering the strength and size of Caladon, we may want to bend the rules for them. Tarant, of course, would enjoy seeing Caladon pay an even heftier tax than anyone, but I think that moderation here will win the day. We've been told that Caladon would enjoy a reprieve from the tax for five years, and then a reduced rate afterwards, but this may be giving too much. Use your best judgment--if you need this issue to tip the scales in your favor, then do so.

The issue of the discontinued use of Caladonian currency is pretty well worked out. Everyone will be happy if you propose that Caladon use her currency for another 5 years, and then switch to the Unified Gold standard. If you feel things are going well, then maybe push for a lesser time table--perhaps 2 or 3 years, or even an immediate switch if you feel they are responding to you. Do not allow them continued use after 5 years. Anything beyond this would be a serious blow to the economic stability of the Unified Kingdom--its imperative that we standardize new members as soon as possible.

The shipping routes that Caladon currently controls are of great importance to the Unified Kingdom. They are a great source of Caladon's trading power, and they generate a lot of wealth through the use of tolls on foreign ships. The advisors are going to want to hold on to those tolls

as long as possible, and we, of course, are going to want them removed as soon as possible. Offer them 5-10 years to continue collecting them, even from Unified Kingdom members. Do not allow them to stay in place beyond that--it compromises the morale between other U.K. members, as well as costing them unnecessary fees.

Labor unions are a sensitive issue. You probably know of the problems we have in Tarant, and we're very interested in avoiding those same issues in a place like Caladon. BUT! There are those among the advisors who believe that the unions represent a positive step for worker's rights, so tread carefully. I think they would be happy if labor unions were legal, but had limited operating rights in the city walls. Only a truly skilled mediator would be able to convince them otherwise.

The issue of the number of votes Caladon will have in the Unified Parliament should be academic. You should not, unless ABSOLUTLEY necessary, offer them anything but the standard initial 2 votes, followed by an increase to 3 votes after five years of membership. If there was a way to limit them to 2 votes indefinitely, we would be very happy, but you'd have to speak VERY convincingly to do so.

The final issue concerns the Caladonian farmers. As you might know, Tarant is very dependent on them for grain, and they have prospered greatly because of heavy export taxes. Caladon will want to keep this so as long as possible. You'll have to decide what is best when dealing with this issue. The sooner the tax is lifted, the better for Tarant. Use this final issue as a bargaining chip if necessary.

Good luck. I'll see you in Caladon.

Edward Willoughsby, esq.

No sooner had I closed the book than a man who had been staring at me intently for the last several minutes finally made his move.

"Excuse me there, madam. I couldn't help but notice that you came out of the offices of Mr. Edward Willoughsby, the Chairman of the Industrial Council. Must have been quite an important piece of business..."

"Who are you to be asking?" *Well this can't be good news.*

He scoffed, "Me? Oh, just a concerned citizen. I know that Mr. Willoughsby is involved in much of what goes on in our fair city, so I make it my business to know what he's up to. And who he's talking to."

Who exactly do you think you're trying to fool? Do you think I don't know that you're up to no good? "You didn't answer my question. Who are you?"

He cleared his throat, staring at me darkly, "As I said, I'm one of a group of concerned individuals who are working towards a common goal. Mr. Willoughsby is a powerful man, and his influences are far-reaching. Men such as he, you just never know what they're getting into..."

The man was very severely aggravating me. I wanted to shout at him, but instead a plan began to formulate in my mind. "What exactly are you insinuating, sir?"

"Nothing, nothing. It's only that I might be talking to Mr. Willoughsby, and then Mr. Willoughsby might tell you something, and the next thing you know you're involved in something you don't completely understand. Do you know what I'm talking about?"

"I don't know what you're talking about." It was clearly a lie, but it was also one that I fully expected the man I was talking with to see through. I wanted him to know that I was no slouch.

His eyes narrowed at me, "Hmmm. Awfully protective of Mr. Willoughsby, aren't you? Perhaps you two are sharing some sort of secret? Something you don't want the rest of the masses to know about? Sounds that way to me..."

Good. Now that you know I can hide things, too, how about you quit playing your stupid little games with me? "I'm sorry... who did you say you were?"

He sighed, understanding my point at last. "My name is Heinrich. Heinrich Jenks. I represent a concerned group of citizens, both here in Tarant and abroad. We've made it our business to... keep a close look on the political power structure in the Unified Kingdom, and to make sure that it's working toward a mutually beneficial end..."

I didn't like the man one bit, and I knew I would like what he had to say even less. Despite that, I engaged in polite conversation. If I could trick him into confiding in me I would have a good bit of information to use against him. "Can I assume that you believe Mr. Willoughsby is not doing so?"

"You might say that, friend. I know that he is currently involved in negotiations with Caladon, and that he is VERY interested in making sure that they become members of the Unified Kingdom. I believe this interest supersedes any other concerns he might have, including the interests of his own constituents. I find this troubling."

Ah, you must be one of those fellows that would prefer war. Go on, tell me aaalll about it. "Are you saying that Caladon's membership is a bad idea?"

He seemed to grow agitated at my apparent disagreement, "Let's look at the facts, madam. Tarant, with the Unified Kingdom, is the most powerful kingdom in all of Arcanum. We have natural resources, shipping and railroads, as well as the most stable manufacturing framework of any city in the world. Much of our great wealth comes at the expense of cities like Caladon, in the form of taxes and tariffs."

You also have severe crime, poverty, and your city is filthy. "So? What are you saying?"

He very nearly growled, his voice raising along with his anger, "So? So Mr. Willoughsby, and his cohorts on the Council, are in effect taking away a great source of Tarant's wealth and power by allowing a kingdom like Caladon to join the Unified Kingdom. Caladon is dependent on us for resources like lumber and technology... if they are allowed to join the Unified Kingdom, then we lose that advantage!"

How can you possibly believe that Caladon doesn't charge its own tariffs on other commodities that Tarant needs to trade for, like grain? Do you honestly believe Tarant is wholly self-sufficient? "But wait! 'We' also gain a military ally... we spend less on defense!" I'd very nearly said 'you' but then I realized it would've betrayed me as Caladonian.

"Yes, but so do they! You see, Caladon loses nothing by joining the Unified Kingdom, and they gain more to solidify their place in the

new age. Tarant embraced the ways of technology early, and so we have reaped the benefits. If Caladon is given the same chance, it only follows that eventually they will become..."

I couldn't believe how short-sighted the man was, but then again I supposed he was a Tarantian citizen. Things were so different on this side of the Stonewall Mountains. "But if they're our allies, we will have nothing to worry about..."

He stared at me haughtily. "Are you really such a believer in human nature, friend? Do you think that a powerful, ambitious kingdom like Caladon would accept the authority of the Unified Kingdom for very long? In only a few years, their power will rival Tarant's, and then there will be war..."

So because you don't know a damn thing about Caladon, you aim to have Tarant start the war first? Caladonians don't think like you do! "Hold on there. Why wouldn't Willoughsby see this?"

He placed a hand on my shoulder, trying to draw me into his confidence. "Don't get me wrong, friend. It's men like Willoughsby who made Tarant what it is today. Men with vision, and the backbone to do whatever it takes to see that vision to its end. Tarant was not always so powerful, and to make it so had a great price..."

I was terribly interested in that subject, especially considering that Willoughsby hadn't been willing to talk about it. "What price? What do you mean?"

"That's another story for another time. And not mine to tell, madam. Let us just say that the Tarantian monarchy was one of the victims of the Industrial Council's visions. As in any war, there were casualties." I supposed I should've expected him to be closed-mouthed on that subject. Nobody was willing to talk about it, yet so many people seemed to know exactly what happened. "If you respect Willoughsby, why question his actions now?"

The tone in his voice was so very condescending it made me want to spit. "Power can do strange things to men, my friend. What created Tarant was patriotism, but I'm afraid that greed is now the fuel behind her fire. Willoughsby stands to make quite a bit of money if Caladon joins the Unified Kingdom. Remember, he's a businessman

first, a politician afterwards..."

If you call me 'friend' one more time I'm going to drop my axe on your foot. "What does he stand to gain?"

Mr. Jenks grinned at me, certain he'd finally started to convince me. I was pleased that my deception seemed to be working.

"Manufacturing concessions, tax advantages... Caladon would do just about anything for a businessman who holds the power to push this agreement through, don't you think?"

The man was a complete idiot. It was Tarant that wanted Caladon to join the Unified Kingdoms, not the other way around. A war would be costly for both cities. "Perhaps. What are you suggesting be done, Mr. Jenks?"

He smiles.

"You see? Two men, strangers really, can have a logical, rational conversation, and the next thing you know things are being done. Good things, mind you, necessary things."

Quit beating around the damned bush. "I've agreed to nothing, Jenks."

He shrugged as if offended, "Have I said that you have? I was just making an observation, madam. It's strange how great things sprout from such insignificant encounters, don't you think?"

He was acting like he'd just bumped into me by accident and it only aggravated me further. "I'm ready to hear what you have in mind, Jenks..."

"Good, good." He lowered his head closer to mind and began speaking in hushed tones. "Most importantly... did, or did not you accept the position as mediator between Caladon and the Unified Kingdom?"

It was a loaded question, as answering it required admitting I'd been asked. I decided to only give him half of the truth. "No... I haven't accepted it."

"I see. Well, if you have the chance to speak with him again, see if you can get him to appoint you to the position. You'll have to be a fairly charismatic person and a good speaker. Willoughsby knows

how to choose his men. But having that position will be a real advantage for doing what needs to be done..."

I really tired of his word games. "And that is?"

He whispered again, "Assassinating King Farad of Caladon."

Oh you did not just tell me that. Do you really expect to get away with this? King Farad is a good king! "I'm still listening, Jenks..."

He nodded thoughtfully, "Yes... I'd pegged you for a patriot." *Perhaps... but certainly not of Tarant.* "We're in desperate need of men like you... the fate of Tarant rests in your hands. First, you should try for the appointment from Willoughsby."

In case you haven't noticed, I'm not a man, and I really wish you'd stop referring to me as one. "And if I receive the position?"

"Then you'll have special access to certain parts of the castle that would be inaccessible if you weren't a special envoy from Tarant." *Spill it all, Jenks... tell me all the details of your dirty little plan.* "Am I to meet someone there?"

He nodded again, more affirmatively, "Yes. The man's name is Vernon. He will instruct you further."

I tilted my head upwards questioningly, "What if I don't get the position?" I wanted every detail I could get, and I could get a lot when I tried.

He sighed, explaining it further, "Then you are to meet a man named Bullors down at the Caladon docks. He'll be around, and he'll be expecting you. He'll help you get into the castle, where you will have access to the kitchens, and then Mr. Vernon. Are we understood?"

I grinned wickedly, "Clearly."

"Good. If you succeed in assassinating King Farad, then return to Tarant and meet me at Grant's Tavern. I'll have heard about it and will wait there. I'll pay no less than 1,000 gold pieces for your trouble. Agreed?"

My response was rather intentionally noncommittal, "I'll think about it and get back to you."

He shook his head, displeased, "Don't think too long, friend. An opportunity like this only comes once in a lifetime. When you've decided, come back here and tell me."

"Well," I said thoughtfully, "First I suppose I'll have to see about getting that appointment, won't I?" I smiled and turned around, disappearing into Willoughsby's office.

Willoughsby looked up at me, obviously confused that I'd returned so soon. I walked over to his desk quietly and spoke in a rather dim tone, "Mr. Willoughsby... I think you should know there's a conspiracy to kill King Farad."

His eyes grew wide and he looked visibly shaken, "What? What are you talking about?"

That certainly got your attention. "I've been approached by a man named Jenks... after a rather lengthy conversation he revealed to me that he wanted me, as the appointed negotiator, to meet up with a man named Vernon in the kitchen in Caladon's castle where I would be given further information on the assassination. After the deed is done I'm to meet up with Jenks at Grant's Tavern for a reward of 20,000 gold. I'm telling you this so you can put a stop to this madman before he finds somebody else who will do this deed for him."

"Bloody hell! You've done the right thing, madam! Where is the Jenks?"

I grinned, "He's just outside, on the corner, waiting for my response to his offer."

Willoughsby hissed at his half ogre guard, "Lorham! Go out and take care of this traitor! We can't let this happen!" He turned back to me, "Tarant thanks you, friend! You've done us a great service. Lorham will make sure that nothing will come of this."

I nodded, "It's no trouble at all, Mr. Willoughsby. Anybody else in my situation would've done the same." I turned and headed out the door. I was halfway through the lobby when Willoughsby's half ogre guard finally got moving and burst through the doorway. He closed the

distance to Jenks in seconds and in a single blow cleaved the man's torso clear from his body.

Bloody hell, those things can really be ferocious when they get riled up. No wonder everybody keeps one around. I nervously made my way out of the building, not liking the gruesome sight one bit. My mind turned to the myriad of things I wanted to accomplish before leaving for Caladon. While a part of me was ecstatic that I'd finally be able to return home, another part was very apprehensive indeed.

Can you ever forgive me, Frederick?

Chapter the Forty Third: One First Must Get Dirty In Order To Become Clean

As badly as I wanted to return home, the thought of it merely brought the sincerest dread to the pit of my stomach. I was afraid of how it would turn out, moreso than I was afraid of assassins or ancient evils. I couldn't really place why and it felt terribly irrational, but still I feared the worst. Perhaps it was a fear of facing everything I'd run away from, or perhaps it was simply a manifestation of the guilt I felt over what I'd done.

It's all right... I can put it off a while longer. I've always planned to return one day... that day's just sooner than I thought. I tried calming myself with little success and, in the end, I decided to give myself the time I needed to grow accustomed to the idea. I had no shortage of places to visit or curiosities to investigate, and it would only make for an even better story to tell Frederick when I finally got back. Instead of heading straight for Black Root, I wandered down towards the Boil to see about that Sebastian fellow that Mr. Willoughsby had mentioned. "I would not enter the Boil if I were you, madam."

The guard stopped me quite rudely as I began to enter the Boil. I supposed that I could understand his desire to protect a poor, innocent woman like myself. Then again I was the pervert of Tarant, so I was probably off in my assumption. "Why not?"

He glared at me with an incredulous stare as if he couldn't believe I would ask such a stupid question. "That is the Boil in there! You will never find a more wretched hive of scum and villainy. You may enter at your own risk, but I wouldn't recommend it."

There was definite truth in his words. There was no other city quite like Tarant and even the worst parts of Black Root wouldn't compare

to the filth of the Boil. I truly was headed towards the worst, most foul den of iniquity that presently existed, and yet... I couldn't really bring myself to care overly much. It was nothing I couldn't handle, and I didn't feel overconfident in thinking about it as such. "I see. I will take my chances, thank you very much."

He started chuckling at me cruelly, "Be my guest... but no one out here will heed your cries for help as you lay dying."

Is that because it's the Boil, because I'm a woman, or because you think me a pervert? I continued onward with a "Hrump" and stepped into the bar labeled Malloy's. A man sitting at a table not far from the entrance beckoned to me as soon as I entered so I wandered on over to him. "Sebastian?"

"Yes... Mr. Willoughsby mentioned that someone might be stopping in here for a drink."

He looks around.

"I can respect a lady with the backbone to make a trip over to the Boil..."

I just want to find out what the hell Willoughsby is up to. "Well... I suppose you could call me a 'concerned' citizen..." I stole the line from Jenks, but it fit well enough.

He arched an eyebrow at me, "I see... Mr. Willoughsby told you of his... 'plans'... over here in the Boil?"

I nodded, taking a seat next to the man. "He mentioned them. Perhaps you might elaborate...?"

"Well..." he lowered his voice to a whisper and moved in closer to me. "Mr Willoughsby has his concerns about what's happening here in the Boil. Do you know anything about the place?"

Other than its well-deserved reputation? "Not much, actually..." I was preciously short on details.

Sebastian seems a bit disappointed in my lack of knowledge.

"Hmmm. The Boil's not a place you want to walk into without knowing what it's about. Most places are like that, actually. Remember that... might save your life someday..."

I almost envied him for having such a luxury as to always be able to look before he leapt. He clearly hadn't been to places such as the Black Mountain Clan mines, or the Dark Fens. I didn't want to offend him, however. "I appreciate the tip, Sebastian. You were saying?"

He shrugged. "Well, the Boil is a rough place. There are two gangs here which control most of the criminal activity... one is Clan Maug, and the other is Pollock's Gang."

Although I was desperately beginning to crave a shot of whiskey I decided I could take care of that shortly. I listened intently as Sebastian continued speaking with me. "I see. Tell me a little about them..."

"Well..." he seemed to stumble looking for the words. It was fairly clear that there weren't many who either dared or bothered to ask such daft questions. "Pollock's Gang is a group of rag-tag ruffians who run things in the South Boil. Clan Maug is holed up in the Bentley, an old hotel just north of here. They're a tad smarter than the boys from Pollock's Gang, but no less deadly..."

"As you can well imagine, Clan Maug and Pollock's Gang aren't very fond of each other. There's quite a few disagreements between members of the gangs, and most of them end up with people dead."

So it's like the slums of any other town, only about ten times worse.

"Interesting. What does Mr. Willoughsby have to do with all of this?"

"Well, Mr. Willoughsby is an important man here in the city. He's a little more than concerned that the element here in the Boil will spill over into the better parts of Tarant. And, of course, he just can't have that happen."

At last it made sense. Mr. Willoughsby didn't give a damn for the poorer section of town, he just didn't want it invading the section where he lived. "I take it that's where you come in?"

He smiled, a hungry and wolfish smile. "Exactly." I was beginning to see exactly what kind of work was being done here.

Everybody else just ignores the problems here because they're "beneath" the rest of the city. Well, damnation, somebody's got to put a stop to it! Most

people don't live here because they choose to! "Hmmm. Sounds like something I might want to get involved in..."

Sebastian's eyes narrowed at me curiously and intently. "Really? You think you're cut out for this sort of work, friend?"

The way he said it made me wonder if there was some aspect of it that wasn't intensely obvious, such as perhaps 'servicing'. "What do you mean... 'this sort of work'?"

"What sort of work, you ask?"

Sebastian gives me a dark look.

"Well, what sort of work do you think it is, friend? There's an infestation here in the Boil... someone's got to take care of it."

That's a relief. It might be distasteful, but I can't just sit by and let these thugs terrorize the city's poor. I had to live like this once, too. "Ah. Well, I'm listening, Sebastian."

He smiled again, regaining his confidence in me. "Good, good. Listen, I know a little bit about you... Mr. Willoughsby knows much about what happens here in Tarant and abroad, and he keeps me informed." *I'm not a damned pervert.* "I'm not exactly sure what it is that you're looking for, but I might be able to help."

I hadn't expected that. Mr. Willoughsby knew more than he let on, it seemed. "What is it you're proposing, Sebastian?"

He cleared his throat and looked me in the eye, "What I'm saying is... you help me take care of my problem here in the Boil, then I might be persuaded to help you with yours. What do you think?"

I glanced down at the sword Sebastian was carrying along with the gun on his belt, "Sounds intriguing. Let's continue..."

Sebastian nods his head, then lowers his voice.

"Well, as you know, Damian Maug and Pollock have always run things here in the Boil. I'm looking to take care of that particular situation..."

Get to the details already. "I see. What are you looking to do?"

He sighed, then whispered further, "Well, usually with all of the fighting that goes on around here, the gangs tend to weed each other out. But lately, the word is that Clan Maug is growing more powerful by the day... that it's only a matter of time before Darien Maug takes over ALL of the operations here in the Boil.

"If Maug consolidates his power here in the Boil without any opposition, then what's to stop him from corrupting the rest of the city in the same manner? Get my meaning, friend?"

Of course I do. You don't give a damn about the Boil unless you think it'll start threatening the upper class. "Clearly. You want me to get rid of Maug."

"Yes. Here's what I'm proposing. You get rid of Damian Maug for me, and I might think about helping you take care of your problem... whatever it might be..."

"Done." I couldn't ignore that I'd at least be helping out the poor, even if I was the only one that cared.

He actually frowned slightly at my acceptance. "Good. Just... do be careful with how you go about this. These gangs aren't the only ones here in the Boil. Not everybody can afford to live in the nicer areas. When you've taken care of the problem, come back here and we'll talk further."

Well, now that was unexpected. So you do care, after all... you've got it, Sebastian. I stood up and stretched my legs, wandering on over to the bar for a quick shot of whiskey before getting things started. "Hello there, bartender. What's the name?"

The man before me is thick, barrel-chested, wearing an apron and what looks to be a permanent scowl.

"He regards you evenly. I'm called Malloy... Caleb Malloy, and this is my pub."

"Nice to meet you, Caleb." I was about to ask him for a shot of whiskey when he suddenly leaned in closely and nearly whispered to me.

"Listen, you're new around here... a man can tell just by lookin' who knows the Boil and who don't. This ain't a nice place to be visitin', especially when you don't know the lay 'a the land..."

I wrinkled my brow, almost offended at the insinuation. "Thanks for the advice, but I think I can handle myself..."

He stood up and smirked at me, "Really, now? Think you know your way around the Boil, do you? I guess you won't be needin' my advice, then. Guess I'll just keep my mouth shut about what goes on around here..."

Fine, fine, rub it in. "Perhaps I spoke too soon, Caleb..."

He laughs, slapping his hand on the bar.

"Maybe you ain't as stupid as you look, lass. You could do a lot worse than to hear what old Caleb has to say about the Boil..."

"Well, go ahead, then. Tell me about what goes on around here." I sighed.

He leaned back against the bar comfortably and started filling me in, "Well, there're two gangs that pretty much run the show here. One's Pollock's Gang and the other's Clan Maug. Pollock's a half-ogre who runs a mish-mash bunch of Hooligans here in the boil - not too organized, mind you, but vicious and cruel.

"Darian Maug's Clan is mostly orcs and half-orcs. He plays it a little quieter, but you can't trust him anymore than a Bangellian viper. Either way, if you get involved with one, the other gang's going to be after your hide. A man needs to be careful about who he works for in the Boil."

"So?" I asked, almost amused, "Which one's the better gang to work for?"

"Well," he sighed deeply, "That's tough to say, lass. Once you decide, there's no going back."

Of course... if you've seen one slum you've seen them all... lowlifes running around in the biggest pack of ne'er-do-wells they can find, the only loyalty to be had one borne of fear... "Nevermind about that, Caleb. Just give me a shot of whiskey."

He frowned and scratched at his cheek nervously, "Funny you should

ask for that, lass."

He seemed to pause, waiting for me to say something. "Give me a shot or tell me a story, but don't just sit there."

"Well, I get a pretty regular shipment of whiskey every week. Except lately, one of the gangs has been stealing it. Normally I don't get any trouble from them. And neither one is owning up to it, because they know somebody's getting their skull smashed when I find out who it is."

I grumbled to myself. *Of course. All I want is one lousy shot and he's not got a drop of whiskey in the whole damn bar.* "What can I do?"

He grinned, "Well, I need someone to go and pick up the whiskey for me. I ain't got a drop left and that just won't do at all. You go pick it up, and I'll give you 500 gold pieces when you get back here. What do you think?"

"Make it 500 and a free shot." I winked at him and he smiled. "What do I do?"

He pulled out a small slip of paper and scribbled some notes on it while he talked, "You're to go out to the middle of the Garrillon Bridge, near the towers, meet up with a man named Biggs. I'll send a boy over there, and tell him to be waitin' for you. Watch yourself, lass... the Boil ain't a place to be gettin' careless, you hear me?"

I took the sheet of paper from him and stuffed it in my purse. "You don't have to worry about me, Caleb. Whiskey's at stake, I'll be taking the utmost precautions." He grinned at me as I turned around and stepped out of the bar without another word. I certainly wasn't about to make my move against Maug without first getting a good drink in, so the Garrillon Bridge was my first stop. I noticed the dwarf by the two towers right where I expected him to be, and I also noticed the obvious orcish gang members on either side of him just waiting for something to happen. I loosened the clip I hung my axe from and approached the dwarf.

"Hey, there... you're Caleb's girl, Right? He told me to be expecting you. I'm Biggs..."

This is going to get messy fast, isn't it? "Yes... I'm here for the whiskey."

The dwarf nodded nervously, "Yeah, Yeah... I've got it right here. My delivery boys keep getting mugged on their way to Malloy's... hopefully you'll have better luck."

I took several bottles of whiskey from him and stuffed them into my purse. It looked like pretty good quality whiskey, too, but I suspected there was a lot of demand for the strong stuff down in the Boil... almost as much of a demand as there was on the Isle of Despair. "I don't think I'll fare much better than your boys, Biggs, but I come better prepared. You'd best make a run for it before things get messy here."

"You don't have to tell me twice!" He, too, had noticed the orcs closing in, but it was too late for him to be clear of them.

"Hey there, missy.....just what is it you think you're doing?"

I nearly spat at the man's feet. *A half-orc and three full-blooded orcs... no doubt this is Maug's work.* "I'm picking up some whiskey for Caleb Malloy." ...*and you'll not bloody stop me.*

He grinned, pulling out a rather lengthy blade from behind his back, "Well, that's a problem now, missy. You see... this here is my territory, and no one brings any whiskey through Malek Nebb's territory without askin' me first. I think I'm going to have to take that whiskey from you..."

I pulled my axe loose from my belt, already swinging it as I answered, "I don't think so, Mr. Nebbs. This whiskey belongs to me, to Caleb, and to any poor bastard with sorrows so great they can only be drowned in the Boil."

Of all the things I'll tolerate, robbery of my damned whiskey is NOT one of them. I wiped my axe blade clean on the fallen thugs' clothing and changed directions back towards the Boil, whiskey safely tucked away in my purse. Caleb seemed particularly intrigued when I walked back in.

"I've recovered your whiskey, Caleb." As I spoke I pulled it out of my purse, bottle by bottle, setting each bottle down on his bar.

"You have! That's grand, lass. Thank you so much for the help. Here's your money..."

He hands me a handful of gold.

"You're welcome in Malloy's anytime..."

"I welcome your money, Caleb, but what I really want is a damned shot." I smiled at him.

He grinned back in return, "Fair enough, lass. A deal's a deal." He put a clean glass on the bar and topped it off extra full with that whiskey. I could tell from the odor alone that it was every bit as good as I'd thought it would be, and the taste only confirmed it. It burned like only a good, strong whiskey can.

I set the glass back down on the bar gently once I'd finished. "It's been a pleasure doing business with you, Caleb... now if you don't mind, I'm going to see about administering some just rewards to those who made that shot so difficult to acquire in the first place."

He gave me a wink and turned around to wash out my empty glass. As the alcohol started to cloud over my mind I began to develop a particularly crazy idea. It didn't strike me as wise to take on the whole of Clan Maug single handedly, especially when the gang was comprised largely of the worst of the worst. It didn't get any worse than orcish thugs.

I sauntered over to a table where two orcs were sharing ales and I quite firmly planted my axe in the center of the table. They jumped up to their feet, spilling ale all over the floor. *Sorry, Caleb.* "Tell me how I can join up with Clan Maug and I won't have to get even more violent."

"You need to talk to Muggs over there then."

He motions to a well-dressed dwarf standing nearby.

"He's always got a job for those who hope to prove themselves to the Clan Maug."

I picked up my axe from out of the table. "I'll do that. Good bye." *I had a feeling they'd respond to that. Thugs only respect what they're afraid of... ask nicely and you'll get nowhere.* I slipped the axe back onto my belt and wandered over to the dwarf the orc mentioned. He had two more orcs on either side of him, which should've been a surefire sign that he was a Clan Maug man.

"Muggs, is it?" The dwarf growled at me as I approached him. "One of your boys told me to come talk to you about a job."

His growling ceased and he looked up at me curiously, "Well, well... looking to join up with Damian Maug's clan, eh? Good choice. Healthy choice too, if you get my meaning. I got an easy job for you, collectin'."

"I'm listening." It was unpleasant, but I was willing to play along with his little game long enough to climb my way to the top. It sure beat chopping my way there the hard way. I had a feeling a woman with my talents would climb the ladder quickly once they realized what I was capable of... and then I'd be alone with Maug.

"There's this bloke Larrs, fell a bit behind on the payments, he did. Someone—that would be you—needs to drop in on old Larrs and collect the coin he owes. I'll give you, say, 50 coin for the work."

Pathetic. You call this work? "What if he doesn't have it?"

The dwarf shrugged, "Kill him."

I thought this was Clan Maug, not Pollock's Gang. Pah, like there's a real difference. "Alright, where's this fellow live?" I had no intention of fully complying with the dwarf's request, but I had to make it look like I was.

"His shack's up Northwest boil a tad, on the left." Muggs seemed to be particularly bored with me. I imagined he was trying to somehow break me, but it wasn't going to work.

"I'll return with his money or his blood." Even I surprised myself with just how violent and thuggish I sounded. I was becoming quite the actress. I shoved my way out of the bar rudely and forcefully to complete the illusion, following Muggs' directions towards Larrs' shack. The smell of urine was nearly overpowering but I pushed my way inside regardless. Larrs seemed to know why I was there.

"Gods! Please, have pity on me! I'm sick and I'm poor. I have no gold to my name and we're starving!"

Good heavens... he's not even a gang member. I took a good look around the shack and at the trembling man in front of me. This was exactly the reason I was going to so much trouble to clean up the Boil. "Don't worry about it, I'll pay your debt for you."

He fell to the ground and started grabbing at my hand, trying to kiss it. "Thank you! Oh, thank you so much! You don't know how much this means to me and my family!"

Oh, but I do... I do all too well. I turned around and left the shack, heading straight back to Malloy's. Muggs looked at me suspiciously as I sauntered back over towards him. I tossed him 200 coins. "Larrs paid up after a bit of 'persuasion'."

"I feared you'd be too soft to be a righteous collector, but I had you figured wrong, it seems. Here's your 50 coins. You should go speak with Damian Maug himself; he'll want a word or two with our newest member. He's up North Boil, in the Bentley. You can't miss it."

Well that was a short ladder indeed. I headed straight back out the way I came and looked around for the hotel that Muggs mentioned. Truly, it was difficult to miss. It was about the only building that commanded any respect in the entire Boil. I strolled over to it purposefully, but when I finally got there I was blocked off by a gnome. He reeked of perfume and I would've laughed in his face, but he had more than a few scars and he looked like he knew how to use a dagger. He spat on my shoes and taunted me, "And just what precisely do you think you would be doing here?"

I tried to shrug off his insult, remembering just how little I wanted to have to cut apart the entire gang one by one... not to mention how poor my chances were of actually succeeding at such a task. "Muggs told me to come see Damian. I just did a job for him."

The gnome sneered at me, "Well, madam, I am Milo, Mr. Maug's man Friday as it were. No one enters here without my say so."

My curiosity finally overtook me and I absolutely had to ask, completely out of the blue, "If you don't mind me asking, what is a gnome doing in the Boil?"

"By that I suppose you mean why am I not in the lap of luxury like all

my high-class brethren? It's very simple, really. I make more in a month than any of them do in a year. Pandering to the basest instincts has always been a most profitable business."

Hmph. A likely excuse. More probable you're not allowed in polite society. "Interesting. Well, if you'll just step aside, I'll be going on in."

He placed his hand on his dagger threateningly, though instead of feeling scared I merely wanted to laugh at him again. "I decide who enters, as I have already told you. Do not cross me, I become rather unpleasant when angry."

Good heavens, get over yourself. "I was told to see Mr. Maug. Enough of this silliness!"

He pulled his dagger off of his belt, "If you keep pushing me, you will be extremely unhappy."

Yes, I suppose I would be unhappy if I had to bury my axe in your skull... mostly because it would ruin my plans. "Fine. What do I need to do to get inside?"

"Oh, don't tempt me! If only I had more time for frivolity. Well, we are always in need of a good strong arm, at least; I know I certainly am."

He smiles to himself.

"Are you interested in a bit of the old rough work?"

You did not just insinuate what I think you did... ugh, if I were a worse person I would be only too happy to make you pay for that remark. "I'm not much for that sort of thing, do you have any other work?" I didn't suspect that he did, but I wanted to test just how much higher of a standard Maug's gang held themselves compared to Pollock's.

The gnome spat on my shoes... again. "You would prefer something along janitorial lines, perhaps? We're a gang, fool. We only maintain power through fear and intimidation. If you're too squeamish for this line of work, perhaps you should just run along."

That only served to confirm my suspicions that Maug and Pollock were just two sides of the same coin. Thugs are thugs no matter the

dressing. "If there wasn't a choice, then why'd you offer one? I asked for a job, now are you going to give me one or not?"

He shrugged casually and I only wanted to harm him further. There were few that could get on my nerves quite as powerfully as that damned gnome. "You know, the usual rival gang killing and all that. A swarthy gentleman, who it just so happens belongs to that dreadful Pollock gang, has taken a liking to my girl. I would like him removed from this world."

I laughed right in the gnome's face, "Your girl? You have a girl? I find that a bit difficult to believe."

"How droll. You are just so entertaining. Do you want the job or not?" I figured I could probably find a convincing way to go about the task without killing, and if things came down to violence then I could only feel so bad about removing another thug from the world. "It depends. What is the pay for that sort of work?"

He shrugged, tossing out the first number that came to his mind, "Let us say 500 gold, shall we?"

I frowned, tapping my foot impatiently, "That sum is a bit light for 'rough work'." In truth, I just wanted to extort the bastard for whatever I could.

He frowned back at me, fingering his dagger again, "That's what it is worth, and it is the only way you will get inside the Bentley. What will it be, then?"

Looks like 500's the limit. Guess it'll have to do. "Alright, I'll do it. Where can I find this bloke?"

"Being of the Pollock gang, he lives down in the awful south Boil. He goes by the name of Treat, an ugly orcish fellow. He claims only partial orc heritage, but to look at him you'd swear he was orc through and through."

...and Maug's clan is supposed to have a problem with orcs or something? Bloody hell, there's an orc standing right next to you! "Consider him deceased." I turned and stalked off to the south Boil, displeased with how this particular plan was going.

"Virgil," I started chatting with him as we walked, "I just want you to know, I'm only doing this to minimize the amount of violence we have to commit. I... I want to help clean this place up, and there just isn't any way to do it without getting my hands a little dirty. They weren't clean in the first place anyway, you know."

His response was unusually quiet, even for him, "I understand, Samantha. I know your heart is in the right place. You don't have to worry about me, I'll stick by you."

Vollinger joined in the conversation as well, considerably more jovially, "I trust you know what you're doing. We've been traveling together long enough that I'd like to think I know you a bit better than these thugs do. I can tell you've got something else in mind."

I smiled, feeling honestly relieved at the trust they were giving me, "Thank you both, I-" I forgot completely what I had been about to say as a massive serpent beast darted out of a nearby house and attacked me.

I quite reflexively turned about and cleaved him in two with a single strike from my axe. As his body crumpled to the ground in an expanding pool of blood it changed shape, slowly shrinking and forming into the body of a half orc. *Well... I suppose that's done... and he did attack me first.* I sighed, wiping the blood off of my axe yet again, and turned back towards the Bentley. I tried to remember whatever I had been trying to say when I was interrupted, but it was long gone. I couldn't even remember the first word of it by the time I was at the Bentley again. The Boil wasn't exactly large.

The gnome nearly applauded at my return, but it was more mocking than genuine. "The gallant warrior returns! Pray tell, are you here to deliver me Treat's head on the proverbial platter, hmmm?"

Stuff it, gnome. "You conveniently forgot to mention he could shape shift!"

"Tut! Such a show of emotion. Why do you think I did not do the job myself? Those shape-shifting snake-things are so distressingly difficult to deal with. And ugly, as well. I suppose I could throw

another 100 coins your way for the added trouble, if you are going to insist on carrying on so!"

It struck me that if I had such an easy time with the shapeshifter and the gnome would've had a considerably harder time, then I would have a rather easy time taking down the gnome if I had to. That was not new information. "Deal." I preferred to avoid what violence I could, even still.

He counted out the coins and placed them in my hand, "Oooh! Splendid! Here's your 550 gold. You are welcome to enter the majestic Bentley, home of the Clan Maug!"

Hmph. Majestic... I'm sure. Finally, it's time to meet the man I'm supposed to kill.

Chapter the Forty Fourth:

Betrayal, Part 1

Even situated in the absolute worst possible place it could be, the Bentley still had a certain charm to it. It was clean, which honestly shocked me, and even well-decorated. It looked like Maug spent much of his ill-gotten gains on surrounding himself with luxury, which I supposed was probably the point. I wound my way around several hallways and blocked off doors. The route I took was the only one available to me, but it strayed so far out of the way I could only assume it was intentionally left that way in case of an attack by Pollock's gang.

After wandering past over a dozen orcs and even dogs, not that there was a strong difference between the two, I finally was ushered into a rather expansive room with a dapper gentleman standing at the far end of it. He had a particularly menacing-looking orc in the room with him and it growled at me menacingly as I entered.

Before me stands an extremely handsome, impeccably dressed man. Even though he is slight of build, an aura of menacing power seems to surround him.

"Ah, the new woman. Please, come in, come in. I have heard of your work with Treat. Difficult work it must have been. Those of his type..."

I'd better be careful with how I play this one. If I move too suddenly that orc will be on me for sure, and I don't need the extra trouble. "His 'type'? What exactly was he?" I entertained idle conversation whilst plotting out the details of the coming murder.

Maug grinned smugly, only too happy to flaunt the ways in which he felt he was better than me, "He was a descendant of those of the Black Legion. Zalakar the bold created the Black Legion long ago, during the Age of Legend. He was a brilliant mage, really. To take a

worthless group of Orcs and give them the ability to transform themselves into such fearsome creatures! Brilliant!" He shook his head sadly, staring down at the clean wooden floor, "The world is lacking such ingenuity these days."

Not exactly what I expected from a crime lord, but I still have to kill you.
"I agree. Too many imitators, not nearly enough innovation."

"Bravo! Excellent! I like your style, madam. It is so rare that I meet someone with a taste for the flair, as it were." He had no idea that I had just insulted him.

I didn't like the present situation I found myself in. It seemed too risky to make my move so soon. "I had heard you might have a job for me." *Just one more job... I'll gain his trust, get even closer...*
"Straight to the matter at hand—we should expect no less for someone of your flair. Well, perhaps you know of my antagonistic counterpart, Pollock? Wretched individual. No style, no originality. Very coarse. Well, I tire of having him as a thorn in my side..."

You know... I think, of any job you could've offered me, I like this one the best. It was like killing two birds with one stone. I couldn't refuse. "Of course. You would like him 'removed'."

He stared at me with a satisfactory nod. "Exactly. The job pays 1500 coins. Are you interested?"

"A job this dangerous will cost you 1600, at the very least." It simply wouldn't have been like me if I accepted his offer straight off.

He frowned. "I do not think so. My offer is firm." It also wouldn't have been like me if I'd actually succeeded at changing his offer.

"I'll give it a go. What are the specifics?" *Get ready, Pollock... and Maug, you're next. The Boil will never be the same when I'm finished.*
"Being cursed with a lack of style, the cretin chooses to lock himself away inside his house. But then, what would you expect from a half-ogre? We've had agents watch his house for hours on end and never see him set foot out of doors, yet during those times he has been spotted about town. Very... curious. His house is in south Boil, but I

wouldn't recommend a direct assault."

I didn't like the way the details were sounding. A half-ogre, and one smart enough to escape watch. I began thinking about taking extra precautions. "How do I get inside his house, then?"

He shrugged, waving me away dismissively. "Perhaps you can use the same entrance he himself uses to slip in and out of his hovel. As to the nature of this entrance, I can't begin to guess."

I'm sure you can, Damian Maug, and so can I. "I will return when our friend Mr. Pollock is no more."

I left the Bentley the same way I came in, already planning exactly how I was going to go about this particular misdeed. Virgil questioned me as I started to cross back over the Garrillon Bridge. "What is it you're planning, Samantha? It's not like you to just dive in headfirst."

"Very astute observation, Virgil," I winked at him. "I think I'd like to take a detour to Dernholm."

He seemed rather surprised, "Dernholm?! I don't think Pollock's secret passage is of a magickal nature..."

Of course it isn't, dear boy. "No, likely he's taking trips through the sewers... that's the best way to escape notice. I'm not going after Pollock straight away... rather, I think I would be best served if I partook in a little bit of training first."

He gasped. *Yes, you heard that right.* "You mean you're to visit Garrick Stout? I thought you didn't like him... you agreed to kill him!"

I nodded and grinned at him smugly, "Yes, yes I did... and what better way to test my skills after he's trained me?"

Vollinger let out a sudden, hearty chuckle, "Nicely done! It looks like you're finally getting around to realizing killing can sometimes do more good than bad."

Yes... I suppose that's true. I won't feel any shame in killing Garrick

Stout... he deserves it after what he's done. "Uh... thanks." I managed to squeak out. I was just arriving at the train station as our conversation reached its conclusion, so I plunked down the 225 coins for passage to Black Root and we were off. I silently cursed at the lack of a train route into Cumbria, although no doubt Praetor was to blame.

Praetor? Didn't he have a job for me? Since I doubted I would be sticking around Dernholm for particularly long after killing the captain of their guard, I elected to take care of any other potential business first.

"Ah! The outsider returns!"

"Any other tasks for a humble outsider?" I despised the man, but I was still polite. *You... it's your fault that Maximillian is rotting on that island, and you're responsible for the state this kingdom is in...* If it hadn't been for greed, I'd never have bothered to return to the man at all.

He frowned sadly, "Yes... there's something of a... personal nature. My daughter has chosen to take up with Auguste Farad, prince of Arland, against my wishes. I fear my harshness has driven her away. She refuses to communicate with me. I would like you to get word to her... I believe she's living in Caladon with the prince. Will you help?"

Caladon was the capital of the kingdom of Arland, but nobody referred to it as such. It was simply 'Caladon'. "How much coin is it worth?" As badly as I wanted to speak with Praetor's daughter if only to give him the return message, which was bound to be impolite, I didn't want to do the man any favors either.

"I regret that I have little to offer but my gratitude, and perhaps a few trinkets,"

Ugh. He expects me to work on the cheap yet again... cheaper, in fact! If it hadn't been for my desire to tell him off using his daughter's words I would have refused outright. "Your gratitude is enough." I felt almost dirty saying it.

"Thank you, outsider. I will eagerly await your return." I left the king, thoughts of my hatred of him boiling beneath the surface of my mind. Along with those thoughts came thoughts of poor Maximillian and the promise I'd made to him. My next stop was Lianna Pel Dar's house.

Her door was open, likely not by her own choice. Such was the state of things in Dernholm. She looked up at me menacingly as I entered, suspicious. "Lianna Pel Dar?"

She nodded, her hand still on a bladed chakram at her waist, "Yes. Who's asking?"

I don't know if you'll believe this, but I bloody have to try... "I bring news of Maximillian."

Her eyes widen, unbelieving.

"Oh my god, Maximillian...? We never dreamed that he was still alive. Where? Where is he...?"

Thank goodness... I was beginning to worry that I could only lie convincingly, nobody ever believes me when I tell the truth. "He is on the Isle of Despair. He was spirited away there one night, never to be heard from again. He lives in a shack at the center of the island, isolated even from the others there. The only contact he has with anybody else is to get a delivery of potato moonshine from the brewer on the island. He yearns to come home, Lianna..."

She nodded firmly, her eyes showing a strong sense of determination. "I see... thank you, my friend. My father would have been so happy... he used to talk of Maximillian endlessly, saying how Cumbria would have been even greater had he taken his rightful place on the throne." She looked out of a boarded up window towards the East, thinking heavily, "Perhaps that might still come to pass. I will go, and return with the true King."

I knew it had been a good idea to deliver word of Maximillian. "I certainly hope so. Farewell, Lianna... I wish you luck."

She bowed to me ever so slightly, "Thank you, friend. I've a long journey ahead of me, but I swear I will succeed." I stepped out of her house and she left immediately. I hoped with every fiber of my being that she would bring Maximillian back *Jayna... I may not have brought you a technical manual like I said I was going to, but if Maximillian returns you may yet see your hometown prosper.*

The weaker part of me wanted to pay Jayna a visit, to see how she was doing. I wanted to introduce her to Terry, and I knew she would fawn over him. I couldn't, however. I needed to be strong if I was going to go through with my promise of killing Garrick Stout. Visiting Jayna again and getting all weepy wouldn't do at all. Instead, I finally set about the business I had come for in the first place. Garrick Stout was not a difficult man to find, he was parading about in front of the barracks smugly.

"Stand fast, madam! You have the honor of addressing Sir Garrick Stout... Captain of the Dernholm Guard and Master of Melee! What say you?"

"Your prowess in Melee is recognized by all, Sir Garrick." I said it through gritted teeth, but he didn't seem to notice my insincerity.

He took the opportunity to trumpet his own significance even more.

"Yes, I am the Master of Melee! I have no equal, for I have never been beaten in battle! Why do you seek me out?"

If I could possibly enjoy killing, I would enjoy killing you. I'll show you 'never been beaten'. "Will you train me to be a Master such as yourself?"

He looked at me carefully, eyeing up the axe on my belt. "You do appear to have some training, although I doubt you will ever be anywhere near my equal. If you truly desire training, I have a task for you to complete as a test of your skill."

Why do I suspect this has nothing to do with my actual skill? "I am ready. What is your task?"

"Send my regards to my betrothed, the Lady Druella. She is a petite beauty, fragile as women of breeding are! I was forced into a duel which she had the misfortune to witness. I destroyed the offender and I fear the sight of such violence was just too much for her delicate sensibilities."

As I suspected. Hmph, you can't really believe things actually happened that way, can you? Forced into a duel my arse. "What happened?"

I almost cringed, thinking about what one-sided half-truths would come spilling out of his mouth next. "She fled the scene, obviously

distraught. I tracked her to try and calm her, but when I discovered her location, it was too late. She had been surrounded by a pack of Gyr-Dolour. I dared not show myself, for fear of increasing her distress and provoking the beasts."

I very nearly rolled my eyes, "Why have you not rescued her from the creatures?"

"I fear that my presence would further agonize the Lady Druella, perhaps sending her further into the traumatized realms of her haunted mind." It was true that Gyr-Dolour fed on negative emotions, although I didn't think trauma was the emotion she'd be feeling if Stout got near. Disgust or hatred, perhaps even fear, but not trauma. "If this happens, the Gyr-Dolour would most certainly go into a frenzy. I fear they might do her harm in this state. My task for you is twofold. First, you must destroy the beasts. Then I need you to speak to Lady Druella. Tell her of my desire to wed her. Let her know that I am sorry she was distressed over witnessing the carnage, tell her I have a proposal for her..."

You have to know the real reason she's distressed... even you can't be that much of a pompous fool. "A proposal?"

"During the battle my opponent, Adkin Chambers, was badly disfigured and blinded. He now resides outside of Stillwater, a crazed recluse. The Lady Druella knew him and is stressed over the circumstance. Tell her I have found a way to cure his blindness."

'Knew' him. If you've gone to the trouble of finding a cure for blindness, you know damn well what really happened, you just think to lie to me and blackmail Lady Druella. I will feel no shame at all in killing you. "You found a way to cure blindness?" Certainly I had never heard of anything capable of the feat.

He showed off the smallest of vials before quickly stuffing it back in his pocket. "Yes. I have acquired a magickal potion, that once ingested will restore the sight of the blind. As you can imagine, it was not easy to come by. To appease her sensibilities, I am offering to gift Adkin with the potion. If she agrees, that is."

You are every bit as disgusting as anybody has ever said you are, and then

some. "What do you mean, if she agrees?"

He sighed as though explaining it to me was a troublesome affair. "All I ask is her willing hand in marriage. She need only return to me in an agreeable state, and I will make sure that Adkin is healed to his former self. What say you? Do you accept my task?"

Hmph. I disagree with your definition of 'willing'. "I accept. Where is she?"

"Excellent! Here, let me show you on your map. Now go and bring her to me. I cannot wait to have her for my..."

"I will return with the Lady Druella shortly." ...*and then kill you.*



Stout truly disgusted me, moreso than even the filthy Mr. Franklin that I'd had to deal with in Tarant when I was particularly down on my luck. Death seemed almost too good for him, but it would have to do. I traveled to the location he'd marked on my map, wondering just how difficult it would be to convince Lady Druella to go along with my plan.

Just as Stout had described, there were Gyr-Dolours feeding on Lady Druella's emotions of despair, rendering her unconscious for who knows how long. At least the past several months. The various food and drink they'd been feeding her to keep her alive were strewn about the ground carelessly, many of them beginning to rot. It was a horrible sight.

The creatures took note of me immediately and they could sense the malice presently in my heart. They turned towards me, attacking in a great big mass. I chopped down the first wave of them nearly instantly and the remaining creatures balked at advancing further. I ran towards them and their group split apart, each of them running

as quickly as they could in any direction that was away from me. Their tiny legs didn't stand even the slightest chance at outrunning me, as fast as I was. I quickly caught up to each of them and brought them down easily.

Once they had fallen, I turned my attention to the half-elven woman on the ground who was just starting to sit up, awfully confused. This woman appears to be emerging from a trance.
"What? Who are you... and those creatures? What is happening?"

I hate to be the bearer of bad news... perhaps that part can wait. "Lady Druella, you are free! I am here to rescue you!"

She frowned at me and shook her head violently, "No one can rescue me from the depths of my despair. My lover is dead. He was a kind, noble, and handsome man, named Adkin Chambers, but he is gone forever! Would that I could join him!"

At least there was some good news in the word I brought, and hopefully more if she'd agree to my plan. "Do you think Adkin Chambers is dead? He is not, I can assure you."

She very nearly shrieked, "Not dead? Not dead! Adkin is alive! But how is that possible? I saw him struck... he fell to the ground. There was blood everywhere..."

I put my hand on her shoulder comfortingly, "He was wounded, but survived the battle."

She suddenly grew very worried, "What then? What happened to him. Tell me!"

I frowned. *Well, you did ask...* "After Adkin yielded, Sir Garrick blinded him in a jealous rage."

"That horrid, horrid beast! There was no honor in Sir Garrick. I am overjoyed at the news that Adkin is alive... yet I am broken-hearted over the loss of his sight. Know you how this has affected him?"

I'm so glad we agree on Sir Garrick. Now if only we can agree on what is to be done about him. "I have... er... been told that he is bitter and

crazed, living as a recluse."

"Oh my!" She started sobbing onto my shoulder, for some reason taking comfort in me just because I was nearby. I didn't really mind, but it did make me a touch uncomfortable. "Adkin must certainly blame me as well! What have I done... what have I done?!"

Now why would you go and think a silly thing like that? Everybody knows who's to blame... even old Mr. Ogg. "Adkin bears you no ill will, madam. His hatred is for Stout alone."

Her eyes lit up excitedly, "You have seen him?! You actually spoke with Adkin?"

I nodded. "I have. Revenge is his constant companion. It is a bitter existence. He sent me here to kill Sir Garrick. He wishes you no harm." I bit my lip, hoping her response would be a favorable one. "Why have you not done it? Why are you wasting your time speaking with me? Go dispatch that beast immediately! I agree with Adkin; he must not be allowed to live."

Glad we agree on that part, at least. Now for the next part. "There is something I want from Sir Garrick, before I kill him."

She seemed upset at my words. "What could you possibly want of a man like him?"

Truly, I felt nearly ashamed, but training would go a long way to helping me on my quest... even if it was from one Garrick Stout. "I wish to be a Master at melee, as is he. I require your help."

She began to look terribly apprehensive, and for that I didn't blame her in the slightest. "How could becoming a Melee Master involve me?"

I removed my hand from her shoulder, looking at the ground in shame. "His price to train me is your willing hand in marriage." She is obviously appalled.

"Willingly! Ha! That will be the day! When I willingly submit to that overzealous barbarian. That self-titled "Sir" is nothing but a

lecherous, baseborn brute!"

I didn't want it to come to this. I don't want to blackmail you, Lady Druella... please, I never said I wouldn't kill him. "He has a potion to restore Adkin's sight."

Her words caught in her throat and she stayed silent for a moment. "Completely? Restore sight that was removed with a blade? That is a powerful magick!" Her expression shifted from one of shock to one of disgust, "Blackmail! He has actually devised a plan to blackmail me into marriage! Is there no end to the offenses of which the beast is capable?"

Oh, there is an end all right... and it's closer than he thinks. I grinned, for once. "Hold your ire a moment lady. I have an alternative offer.... Now hear me out. If you agree to wed Sir Garrick..."

She stamped her foot. "I do not like the direction of your plan. However, you may continue..."

Patience, dear Lady... "I will get the potion to heal Adkin, and then I will be trained as Sir Garrick's equal. Then... I shall kill Sir Garrick!" Realization dawns on her.

"Why, that is an excellent plan! Adkin's sight will be restored and we shall be rid of Sir Garrick once and for all! But why would you do this for us? You are a stranger."

You're acting as though I get nothing out of all this. I get training from Stout, training from Chambers, I remove a foul beast from the world, and I right a wrong of the past. Is that so wrong? "Let's just say I have my own reasons."

She snorted. "So your reasons are selfish."

Partially... yes. "I would also like to see justice served. Are we agreed?"

She didn't think about it for particularly long before finally agreeing. "It is agreed then. Let us be off, I wish to end Adkin's suffering quickly!" I nodded and the four of us, plus Terry, departed for

Dernholm. I felt guilty for blackmailing Lady Druella, but I truly did have her best interests in mind. I wanted to help her, not solely because I was benefitting from it too. I couldn't deny that was a part of it, however.

Stout's eyes widened as he saw me approaching with Lady Druella behind me.

"Well done! I did not think you were up to the task! So, she comes willingly? To wed with me in exchange for Adkin's sight?"

I smiled sweetly, lying through my teeth. "Yes. She does." Lady Druella didn't dare speak, for her voice would've given it away in an instant. She merely nodded, holding back her disgust.

He stared and stared at her almost endlessly, "Ah, Lady, you are a sight to behold..." She cast a glare in my direction and Stout suddenly seemed to remember they weren't alone. "Ah, yes, let us proceed. Here is the potion..." he handed me the vial, "See that it is delivered to Adkin Chambers in Stillwater."

I tapped my foot impatiently. "...and my training?"

"Traning? oh yes....."

he eyes me with contempt.

"You have lived up to our bargain. very well, I grant you traning. You are now a Master. Your title is equal to mine, but I doubt your skill ever will be. Now be gone, I have a bride to bed!"

Ugh, you've got to be kidding me. Do you really think I could allow you to do that to the poor Lady? "Well... now I guess it's time for you to pay for your crimes!"

"Betrayer!" he shouted, drawing his blade. True to his title, he wielded it excellently and I was not able to dodge out of the way fast enough. His blade sliced open my shoulder and would've sliced all the way to the bone had it not been for my armor. I could feel a burning sensation from the wound and slowly the burning spread throughout my arm and into my chest. *This feeling is... poison! You bastard!*

Virgil could see the effect the poison had on my body and he mumbled a quick spell to get rid of it. As luck would have it, his spell

took effect on the first try. It was as though even the Gods were with me in my decision to rid the world of the foul Garrick Stout. Once I started feeling better I set my sights upon the task before me. His skill with a blade was good, but in other ways he was far too slow. I easily danced around to his backside where I had an ample opportunity to strike him where it would hurt the most.

Lady Druella turned her back, unable to stomach the violence that followed. My axe cut straight through Stout's armor, into his shoulder, and straight through the bone. The force of my strike was unlike anything he'd ever experienced before. He cried out in pain as his weapon arm was violently severed from the rest of his body. His cry summoned one of his mindless subordinates to his aid.

Damnation! I didn't want to kill any innocents! Still, a man that comes to the defense of Stout can hardly be considered completely innocent. There was little choice in the matter, as Vollinger's gun rang out, the bullet pinging harmlessly off of the guard's shield. While the guard was distracted, however, Terry gripped him by the leg and tore through his armor mercilessly. That dog was an unholy terror when he got riled up, and he really, really hated seeing me in combat.

Virgil was kind enough to put what remained of the guard out of his misery after Terry had finished with him. I was not so kind to Garrick Stout. I let him lie there, slowly bleeding to death, as a punishment for all of the sins I now released him from. *One hit, Sir Garrick, all it took was a single hit from the student that 'could never be your equal' and now the life drains from your body. Think on that, as you lay dying.*

What remained of the armor left behind by Garrick and the guard that came to his defense seemed like it would be useful, so I removed the undamaged pieces and handed them off to Virgil for carrying. I could always make something potent out of them, or simply sell them off to the junk vendor at a profit. They certainly weren't being used by their former owners any longer. The last thing I needed to take was the eyes from Garrick's head. It was a gruesome task, but I certainly wasn't going to ask anybody else to do it. After it was done, I addressed the Lady Druella once more.

"Oh, well done! You have no idea how happy I am that sir Garrick received his just reward. You are an excellent fighter, I doubt there

are any alive who can match your skill. I thank you."

Hey, now... don't let it go to my head... "You are most kind, lady. Shall we go to Adkin now?"

She frowned and shook her head. *What? Now what? You wanted this...!* "Please, take the healing potion to Adkin. I will remain here."

"You do not wish to come with me? Why? I can keep you safe..." When I put more thought into it, I realized that I probably wouldn't have wanted to travel with anybody after watching them viscerally cut the eyes from a corpse, either.

She actually didn't seem bothered by that, though. I'd always known that Stout's claims regarding her aversion to violence were nothing but hogwash. "I love him so much. Yet I am uncertain as to his feelings towards me, after what has passed. Please tell him I am here. Once he is healed, he may join me if he desires to do so."

I suppose that makes sense... he will be able to make the journey here once he is healed... "I will do as you wish. Goodbye, Lady Druella." I turned around and made my way out of Dernholm, fighting the urge to stop once again when I passed the sweet herbal scents that lingered on the outskirts of the town. *I'm not barging into Jayna's house with a fistful of bloody eyes. I can't.* I cared for her too much to inflict such horror upon her for my own selfish needs, so I merely left.

There were no trains headed to Stillwater and, given how much faster travel by rail was, it made the most sense for me to make a quick stop in Tarant. I found a stream along the way to Black Root that I used to clean the blood off of my hands and I tore off a bit of my dress to wrap the eyes in before stuffing them in my purse. *Ugh.* Having at least made myself look presentable, I was able to hop on the train to Tarant.

While there, I decided to make a quick detour to take care of the little problem I had in the Boil. I didn't want Maug or Sebastian to grow impatient and take matters into their own hands, and the following trip to Stillwater seemed like a good way to test out Sebastian's loyalties when he inevitably joined up with me, assuming

he made good on his promise. I needed all the friends I could get, both for chasing after the Dark Elves and for emotional support when I confronted my old home.

"Hey, what? It's a pasty-faced human harlot thinking she can just waltz right through our section of town without paying the piper. Cough up 10 coins, you boring sod!"

You've got to be kidding me. This again? I've just become the master of melee for heaven's sake! You really want to pick a fight with me?

"Perhaps I will simply leave, instead." ...and you will, too, if you know what's good for you.

The idiot orc didn't seem to get the hint. "No, no, that's not the way this works at all. You see, you give us money, or we cut your throat. Simple, eh?"

I stamped my foot, drawing my axe out. "It doesn't work like that, either. I was trying to spare your useless life, and you failed to get the hint." Of course, he didn't take kindly to my threat and he attacked me, and I had no choice but to defend myself. His two companions tried to come running to his aid and they met grisly ends as well. *Idiots. Why couldn't you just run away?*

I stepped over their bodies and continued onwards, towards the sewers. They didn't smell any more pleasant this time than they did the last time, but I was relatively sure this would lead me to Pollock's hideout in no time. This section of the sewers was different, however, not at all like the section I'd tromped through looking for a ring months back. There weren't merely rats, there were full-blown zombies and snakes!

I didn't really have a problem disposing of zombies, but it was a horrible surprise. Zombies! In the Tarant sewers! I'd always heard rumors of the undead in Caladon's sewers, but Caladon had a massive graveyard and the city itself was said to have been built on an ancient burial ground. That, plus all the magick, well... it made enough sense to keep me the hell out of there, that's for sure. To find them in the Tarant sewers, however, was just weird. As far as I knew, there was only one technical schematic for creating zombies and I certainly hadn't shared it.

Although individually the zombies were nearly harmless, as a group they posed a moderate threat. I sustained quite a few bumps and bruises, and I even suffered the occasional bite. Things certainly could have gone a lot more smoothly than they did. I was beginning to doubt that Pollock took this path into the city at all, however they were undead so the chances of them just getting back up again in a few hours were high. It wasn't entirely impossible, so I pressed on. After cleaving through at least a hundred zombies, a small ladder leading upward confirmed my suspicion at last.

I climbed up the ladder and found myself in a hidden room of a run-down shack. There was no mistaking the condition of the building or the architecture - I was in the Boil. I wasn't in particularly good condition, either. The zombies had swarmed me and done a number on me, and I was only now starting to realize just how much blood was leaking out onto the floor. It had been rather difficult to tell from inside the sewers, where the color of my blood hardly did anything to change the color of the horrible liquid I had to force myself to walk through.

From the next room I could hear the unmistakably heavy breath of a man of ogreish descent. I peeked through a crack in the door to see him, large and very heavily-muscled. Far stronger than myself, for certain, and not nearly so wounded. On top of that I was sure to have to fight his lackeys if I couldn't end the fight quickly. There was no way they wouldn't hear the noise through the paper-thin walls. *Bloody hell, I was a fool to think this would be so simple...*

Chapter the Forty Fifth:

Betrayal, Part 2: Cleansing

Pollock was on me the moment I stepped out of the doorway. He swung a clumsy ham-fist in my direction and I leapt forward, rolling to safety. Behind me I could hear the splintering of wood as his fist contacted the door that I'd just escaped from. I didn't pause for even a moment, attacking him from behind while he still struggled to recover from his failed attack. My axe tore into him relentlessly, burning through the thick leather covering his body and ripping apart the flesh, leaving behind only charred, bloody remains.

He roared out loud in pain, his voice carrying clear throughout the shack and no doubt to the slums beyond. I heard a banging at the door suddenly: his underlings, trying to force their way in. At first I heard the wood begin to splinter, and finally it burst. The sound of footsteps and shouting grew suddenly louder, but I didn't even turn around to look. Scowling, I swung my axe once more.

With a phenomenal burst of strength I cut clear through nearly half of Pollock's body, severing far more than just his arm. His primal bellow grew strangled, then abruptly cut off as his oversized body tumbled to the ground with a wet thud. I turned to face the thugs that had burst in behind me with a hateful glare in my eyes. One of them dropped dead before I could even take a step, a trickle of blood running down his forehead and the sound of a gunshot erupting throughout the shack. Terry darted past my legs and leapt at another thug, strangled screams mixing with his bestial growls. I advanced on the remaining thugs, the blade of my axe smoking where the blood rapidly burnt off.

The thugs were too shocked, too horrified to even move. They merely stared on, slack-jawed, as each of them dropped one by one. When the last of them fell I carefully stepped over the door they'd burst in

through and I looked out at the thugs outside. *You all had to know this was coming from the day you signed on with Pollock. Did you really think it would end any other way?* I mercilessly tore through anything my axe blade could touch, and any thugs that dared get within my reach paid the price dearly.

At long last, after what seemed like hours of fighting, all of the thugs lay dead around me. I could still hear their cries in the back of my head, the horrible sound of tearing and burning flesh. Could this really be considered justice? Revenge, perhaps retribution if I'd wanted to make myself feel good about it. There was no justice in cruelly tearing apart defenseless thugs, no matter their past sins. That I would likely have to do it again only sickened me further. *Where did I go wrong? When did this become acceptable?*

I placed my head over an empty oil drum and I retched into it. The smell of blood and burning flesh was nauseating enough, and the thought that I was the cause pushed me over the edge. "Samantha?" Virgil placed a hand comfortingly on my shoulder. I could hear the sadness in his voice, but I couldn't tell if he was sad at what I'd done or what it had done to me. "As soon as you're feeling better, we should move quickly. It's only a matter of time before one of Maug's gang tries to take credit for this, and that'll make what we have to do next even tougher."

I sighed. He was right. I couldn't waste time feeling sorry for myself, sorry for the mess I'd gotten myself into. If I backed out now it would only be a matter of time before Maug took over the city, now that Pollock was dead. Perhaps it was for the best anyway. It wasn't as though hacking apart thugs would damn me any further. One was either damned or not, and I was most certainly the former. I might as well take as many violent thugs, criminals, and selfish low lives with me as I could. Regardless, I still hated it.

The gnome at the door to the Bentley sneered at me as I walked past, but his eyes grew wide when he spotted my axe and the blood covering my armor. Even if he'd known for sure I was up to no good, he sure as hell didn't want to stand in my way. I walked all the way up to Maug completely unopposed. "Pollock will bother you no more." He only had to look into my eyes and at the state of my

clothing to know beyond a doubt it was true.

"I like you better by the minute. Here is your... if you'll excuse me, I'm a busy man and I must return to my work."

Don't think you'll brush me off that easily. I stepped forward and placed the coins he offered into my purse. Without skipping a beat, I drew my axe back off of my belt and swung it at him. He barely had time to gasp in horror before the axe severed his neck clear through. The orcish guard on the side of the room cried out a foul, grunting scream for several seconds before he, too, was permanently silenced.

Damnation! I wasn't fast enough... the whole damn place is aware of what I've done now.

Terry rushed out of the door to the room we were in and I could hear the strangled grunts of the orcs outside as he tore into them as mercilessly as I'd torn into Pollock's gang. *I'm not getting out without a fight now. At least I've succeeded, even if I should die here.* I stalked back out the way I came in, passing by Terry's gruesome work and continuing on into the next room.

Virgil walked alongside me, chopping into the first orc that approached us with his own axe. I easily dispatched the next one while Virgil was still pulling his axe out of the previous one. I heard the sound of an unfamiliar yip as three war dogs burst into the room through the open doorway left by the orcs. Vollinger's gun rang out, then rang out again, and two of the dogs fell to the floor, motionless. The last dog stopped and merely growled at me. I approached, ready to defend myself if I had to, and it tucked its tail between its legs and ran away. *That's right. You're the smartest one in this bloody hotel.*

The gnome was still waiting by the door when I exited, with a look of absolute horror on his face. He had to have heard the screams and the gunshots, he had to know I was coming out. If he didn't want to move out of the way that was his own damn fault. He nervously grabbed his dagger and held it out towards me, trembling. I looked down at him, axe in hand, "Move." He shook even harder when he heard the sound of my voice.

"N-no way," he shouted, "You think you can take me, whore?! I've killed men twice as good as you!"

The next thing he knew, his dagger arm was lying on the ground next to him, and he was passing out from the loss of blood. He wouldn't live for even 5 minutes. The orc next to him turned, grunted, and charged at me. He, too, met with the blade of my axe in a most painful fashion. As he was the last, I finally hung my axe back on my belt. The bloodbath that had raged for half the night was over, and I stood at its center. Unable to hold it in any longer, I hung my head low and began to cry. I must have been quite the odd sight, sobbing in the midst of a pile of corpses that I'd been the cause of.

Vollinger was the first to notice. "Perk up, Samantha. You've done a good thing this day. It might be gruesome, but killing... well, it's a part of this world. Their deaths do more good than their continued living would have."

Surprised, Virgil looked over at me suddenly realizing just how poorly I was taking my newfound quest for 'justice'. "Hey... hey, Samantha..." he pleaded. He slowly walked over to me and put his arms around me comfortingly. "Samantha, snap out of it... you're not alone in this... nobody is going to miss these thugs. Thanks to you, the people that can't afford to live anywhere else are going to be able to live without fear, without extortion... doesn't that mean more to you than these scum, who would've only continued harming people if you'd let them?"

I pushed against him weakly, almost trying to push him away but without any real effort behind it. I felt comfortable in his arms and, despite my frustration, I didn't honestly want him to let me go. "How can you say that...? How can either of you say for sure that we've done such a good thing when we're standing in the middle of a bloody pile of corpses?!"

He sighed, but he was so close to me that I could feel his chest expanding as he inhaled and I could hear his breath through his chest. "Samantha, I know it's hard to accept when you're right in the middle of all of it, but some people... the pain they have caused has a price that must one day be paid. If you weren't here, their sins would only grow worse... and when somebody finally came to put a stop to them, they might not make it so fast and painless as you have. Really, this is the best way."

I wrapped my arms around Virgil and hugged him back. Taking a deep sigh, I stepped out of his embrace and looked once more at the carnage that I'd caused. Terry barked reassuringly and licked at my hand. "All right... you do have a point... I'll just... I'll get over it." Vollinger patted me on the back and Virgil smiled at me reassuringly. "I'm sorry for going a little crazy on you." I sniffled gently. I still felt awful inside, but I held it back... I tried to look strong for the sake of my companions. Showing such strong signs of weakness felt like a betrayal of their faith, at least if I kept my feelings to myself I was only guilty of betraying my sense of human decency.

Vollinger reloaded his gun and stowed it away for future use. "No harm done, no harm at all. Come on, let's tell that Sebastian fellow of the good news. There's plenty to be done and the sooner that's out of the way the sooner we can get some much-needed rest, then set about taking care of other things." I wondered if he could tell that I still felt terribly distressed, and that's why he was suddenly taking charge. I didn't really care what the reason was, I was grateful.

Malloy's wasn't far from the Bentley and, like I would expect of any business in the Boil, it was still open despite the considerably late hour. Sebastian was still inside, too, sitting at the same table and having a drink. "I've taken care of that 'problem', Sebastian. Now you said you'd be interested in helping me?"

"Yes...you seem a fairly competent woman. What exactly are you involved in?"

I suppose that I might as well find out right off the bat if I can't trust him.

I looked around the bar at the remaining lackeys from both gangs, wondering what they would do when dawn hit and the morning sun revealed the night's festival of carnage. They were the only ones left of their gangs. I spoke quietly, not caring for any of them to overhear my story.

"Have you ever heard of the Molochian Hand, Sebastian?" He shook his head 'no'. "How about the I.F.S. Zephyr?"

He started to shake his head yes when realization dawned in his eyes. "The woman from the newspaper...?"

"Shh!" I cut him off, nodding affirmatively. "There was a dwarf on that zeppelin who escaped from something horrible... I still don't know exactly what. The zeppelin was attacked to get rid of him, and just in case he talked to anybody there were to be no survivors. Well, he hadn't talked to anybody... until it went down in flames, and I was the only one left standing. He gave me a ring and told me to find its owner.

That owner was Gilbert Bates. He'd given the ring to the dwarf on the zeppelin years prior, as a sign of trust. The old man nearly had a heart attack when I showed up in his mansion with that ring in my hand. He hired me on the spot to track down the missing Black Mountain Clan dwarves, and I've been chasing after them ever since. Oh, you have no idea where my travels have taken me... and now I go to Caladon to find the last remaining copy of a book that might reveal the hidden location of the village of Dark Elves. Nasty fellows, those are. You sure you still want to come with me, knowing where I'm going?"

He waits a while before continuing.

"So. You're telling me that all of this happened to you because you were the sole survivor of the IFS Zephyr disaster?"

What, did you think it was all a huge joke? Do I look like I'm joking?

"Yes."

He set down his ale and shook his head, confused. "Well, I'm no hero, but I do like a good fight. You seem the trustworthy sort, and I might be willing to lend a hand..."

"So, you'll join me then? Even knowing the risks?" If he wanted a 'good fight' as he put it, he was sure to find one if he stuck by me long enough. *Everybody has their reasons, I suppose... who am I to suggest his is a shallow one?*

He stood up from the table, securing the gun on his belt. "Surely, friend. Why don't we be on our way?"

I clapped him on the shoulder with a smile, "Welcome aboard, Sebastian. We'll head out in the morning, but there are more than enough beds in the inn for all of us. As long as you're fighting by my side, I'll even foot the bill."

He smiled back at me, almost embarrassed, "I haven't slept in a warm bed for a good, long while. I'd quite like that."



In the morning Sebastian thanked me once again for the room. I checked over his supplies and frowned at the state of his gun. It wouldn't do to have any members of my group using outdated devices. I rummaged through my belongings until I found the old gun I'd made using that strange chassis I found on the Isle of Despair. It was an unknown, but I was confident it would be better than what Sebastian was using. He looked it over approvingly, nodding at it with admiration, then tossed his old gun in a rubbish bin. He didn't exactly seem like the sentimental sort.

Ultimately, we were headed to Stillwater, but I wanted to minimize the amount of travelling I had to do before finally making way for Caladon. I aimed to visit a few shrines to the older gods before leaving, having become somewhat more religious in recent months, and that added a number of interesting twists. I needed to pay Alberich a visit before Geshtianna, and while the latter coincided with my final destination the former was all the way over in the Wheel Clan caverns. If I were visiting the Wheel Clan anyway, I thought it would be a good idea to bring along the Durin Stone for Erick. Besides which, I was just damned curious about that whole thing. My first destination was the Place of Lost Voices I'd seen on the map I found in the ancient, iron chest.

Inside, I found a rather short cavern at the end of which was one of the strangest machines I'd ever seen. "Good god," Sebastian exclaimed as we got closer to it. "What IS that thing?"

I winked at him, "Ah, I forgot to mention this part. I've been tracking

down some ancient dwarven history. You know that unopenable chest in the zoological society? It had a map to this place, and these three- oh! Look! There's spots on the machine for me to put these small drums!"

He shook his head in amazement, "Didn't you say unopen- aw, hell, nevermind. You're damned resourceful, you know that?"

I chuckled at him as I jammed one of the drums into its place on the machine, "Yes. I do."

The machine started to whirl slightly as I placed the drum in it, then it clicked and spat the drum out. *Hm. Must've been the wrong drum for that spot.* I heard the faint sound of dragging metal from all around me, followed by a rather distinct 'click, clack'. Mechanical spiders started to surround the five of us from every corner of the room.

I pulled out my axe unhesitantly, only too happy to defend myself against the malevolent constructs. One of them jabbed me with a mechanical mouth on its frontside and the burning in the wound suggested I'd been poisoned yet again. *Nasty little bastards...* They were constructed like nothing I'd ever encountered before, incredibly sturdy and powerful. It took several well-aimed strikes to the weak parts on their joints to finally dismantle each one, and meanwhile there were several more swarming in.

Sebastian and Vollinger held off the distant ones to the best of their ability, slowing them with fast and repeated shots. Terry took to a nearby spider, ripping it apart but at a great cost. I winced, watching the poor boy break nearly every tooth in his mouth. He was a vicious bastard, that was for sure, never even hesitating no matter what it cost him. Luckily for him he had no technological aptitude whatsoever, so Virgil had him fixed up in no time. Although our wounds were great, the last of the spiders did eventually fall beneath our combined efforts.

I brushed myself off and continued playing with the machine while Sebastian looked over at Vollinger. "This kind of thing happen around her often?"

"Absolutely!" Vollinger announced cheerfully.

"Heh." Sebastian sounded half afraid and half amused. "Well, then I guess I can't regret signing up, now, can I? I wanted a fight and I sure as hell got one. Ain't had a fight like that in years." At least he was enjoying himself. I wouldn't have been happy if he suddenly changed his mind, although that was part of the point to dragging him around elsewhere before heading to Caladon. I needed companions I could trust, if he was going to turn tail and run it was better sooner than later. I slid a drum into place and it 'clicked', then the machine started whirring.

You hear a sound. It's very faint and broken, but it might be a voice. What the machine sputtered out was horribly faint and I couldn't really tell exactly what it was trying to say. Dreadfully curious I jammed another of the drums into the second slot. The machine whirred to life again and the voice came through, somewhat clearer, "Listen well... the words... passed... Iron Clan... find the book... Durin's Truth... within its pages... lies the key"

This is definitely going somewhere. I jammed the third drum in-place and listened excitedly as the machine whirred to life yet again. Sebastian wasn't the only one with a pleasantly shocked expression on his face.

"Listen well to the words passed down from the Iron Clan. Find the Book of Durin's Truth, for within its pages lies the key that you seek." "Well now," I sang, "Not what I was hoping for, but interesting nonetheless, eh?"

After several moments of silence, Virgil finally spoke uneasily, "Uh... do you have any idea where we might find that book, though?"

I shrugged, "I'm fairly certain it's not in Frederick's study, but he might've acquired it while I've been away. We'll be in Caladon anyway, we can always check."

He nodded understandingly, remembering the last time I spoke of Frederick's study. "That sounds like a good idea. I look forward to meeting this Frederick of yours."

I smiled at him, "Oh, I'm sure you'll get along just fine. He'll

appreciate that you've been keeping me safe."

We left the place of lost voices empty-handed, but with at least an idea of where to go to follow up on that lead. Although the Wheel Clan was in the opposite direction, I elected to head towards Tarant instead. It was only a few days out of my way and my equipment had gotten dinged up rather severely in the battle against the spiders. I didn't feel that my own skills were up to the task of repairing such severe damage.

When I arrived back in town the criers were yelling something about a story involving Franklin Payne in the paper. He was quite the legendary adventurer, a title which I loathed but was rapidly beginning to realize fit me well, so I decided to purchase a paper and take a look.

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FRANKLIN PAYNE HONORED

TARANT COAT OF ARMS BESTOWED FOR LIFETIME ACHEIVEMENT

Franklin Payne was awarded the Tarantian Coat of Arms last night during the annual civic awards banquet. After accepting the prestigious award, Mr. Payne regaled the event goers with one of his customarily shocking tales

of derring do.

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Sirs,

The publication of the article in last week's paper entitled "Local Artist Honored" can only be characterized as despicable. The quality of editorship shown by your paper has fallen off considerably in recent months. This piece of scurrilous trash is a perfect

example of this decline in responsible editing. Miss Sykes has shows a marked lack of maturity; it is very easy for a young girl of tender years to be led astray by passionate rhetoric. I urge her parents to enroll her in one of the many finishing schools for young ladies that may be found in our fair city. She will find the knowledge that she gains there to be most efficacious in assisting her in what must be the primary goal of any well-bred young lady, matrimony.

As for your editorial staff, shame. You have allowed this young woman far too much leniency in letting her pen this piece of rubbish. And you have shown a complete lack of responsibility in allowing it

to be published. The overly imaginative artwork provided by Mr. Smelt was the worst part of the publication of that dastardly piece of anti-industrial propaganda last year. Without those horrible scribbles, there would have been nowhere near the unrest among the illiterate working classes. If it is true that these elves have chosen to somehow honor this man, it must be credited to their incomparable charity, rather than any sense of artistic achievement on Mr. Smelt's part.

I question both the veracity of your reporting and the necessity of publicizing this stain upon the artistic community. I am thoroughly disgusted with your journal.

Hmph. So I'm tracking down ancient dwarven history and he gets all the adventuring credit, eh? I didn't really hold Franklin any ill will. I actually somewhat admired him for his lifetime pursuit of adventure, and the charisma with which he talked about it. I could've had that kind of attention for myself if I desired it, but I learned my lesson already, long ago. No, there would be no more stories about me in the paper if I could help it.

I continued past the crier and to the junk man I'd slowly befriended since the first time I entered Tarant. I always sold him quality junk, and he always performed the repairs I couldn't for an honest fee. "Well, now what the hell have ya done? You've really got to learn how to take better care of yer stuff, girl."

I shrugged at him, "But YOU take such good care of it! How about showing me a thing or two? I think the going rate is 500 coins."

He looked shocked, "500 coins?! You'll give me 500 coins just to tell you what I know about repairin' junk?!" I counted out the coins and plunked them down onto the desk in front of him.

"Well, that's right kind of ya, Samantha Colburn. Okay! Yer an Expert at repairing stuff now. Have yourself some fun with it. Oh yeah, nearly forgot... if you ever wanna be a Master, go and find Maxim. He's got a factory over near Caladon. Well, that's all. Goodbye."

Maxim again, eh? I really will have to pay that gentleman a visit. I hope my reputation doesn't precede me. "Thank you." I called out, leaving the junk man behind. My next stop was at the Wheel Clan, barely a week's journey to the North from Tarant. I didn't have terrifically much to do there, but it was nice to visit it again and see what the dwarves had been up to since Loghaire's return. They looked somehow happier than they were when I last visited. Of course, while I was there I also offered a lava rock to Alberich.

I could feel his blessing take hold over me as the rock vanished before my very eyes. I never got tired of that feeling. Excited, I at last made for Stillwater. I severely disliked how cold it got as I approached that corner of the world, but keeping a good pace did wonders for keeping warm despite not having warmer clothing. When I arrived in Stillwater I elected to temporarily pass by the church of Geshtianna in favor of something quite a bit more important.

Adkin Chambers hollered at me again when I entered his shack, not recognizing my scent. I sighed patiently, trying to correct his mistake. "Your student has returned, Mr. Chambers, and I've brought a gift from Lady Druella."

He gasped suddenly, "Lady Druella! You have seen her! What has she sent?"

"A potion. I have been told it will restore your sight!" It warmed my heart to be able to tell that old man what I'd brought for him. He may have been crazed, paranoid, and vengeful... but I could tell from Lady Druella's devotion that he had been a different man before then. I only hoped that the potion I brought and news of his love would return him to the former man he once was.

"Restore my sight?! How did she come by such a thing? Is this some type of tomfoolery?"

You know, if I were in his shoes, I wouldn't believe it either. "Garrick attempted to blackmail her into marriage with it." I winced, expecting the outburst that was about to come.

"That evil, cunning beast! Was there no end to the atrocities to which he was capable? You have done well to rid the world of his presence. What are you waiting for? Give me the potion!" As rude as he was being, I truly couldn't blame his impatience. I handed him the potion and guided his hands to it. He drank it down hurriedly and the transformation I witnessed was nothing short of amazing.

It was truly a horrifically potent magick; my skin began to itch and eventually burn as he drank deeply from the tiny vial. He looked at me with wide eyes, he truly LOOKED at me for the first time.

"I can see! I can see! Gods be praised! I have never heard of such a magick before! That monster must have paid dearly for this draught! Oh bless you! Please... what of Druella?"

"She is in Dernholm - she was unsure if you still loved her." *Please understand... you've not been yourself these past months, or perhaps even years.*

He shook his head, "My love for her has never faltered. I leave at once! Thank you for all you have done for us. You are an honorable warrior. May the gods bless you on your journey! Goodbye!"

He made as if to walk out the door, but I pulled Garrick's eyes out of my purse. "Thank you for the compliments, Mr. Chambers, but there is one more thing... I hate to hold you up, but I did as you asked of me... here are Sir Garrick's eyes."

He looked at the eyes with absolute hatred, "I knew I would have retribution! Now you have paid for your crimes! Vengeance is MINE!" He crushed the eyes in his fist, tossing them aside.

I winced, looking at it. "Um, yes, now that that's finished... might I have my training?"

"Yes, madam! Anything you wish for ridding the world of that vile creature! By killing Stout you have proven your capability in our art. Allow me to bestow upon you the title of Dodge Master. Thank you. Thank you so much."

"Thank you. I will continue my adventures..." I still had business to attend to in town and there was no reason for me to detain Mr. Chambers from his love any further. I'd gotten everything out of the deal that I'd wanted: training, a happy ending, and even some semblance of justice. *Hmph. Of all people, I have no right even thinking of such a virtue.* I left Mr. Chambers' shack and waved goodbye to him as he stalked off towards the south, then I headed directly to the church of Geshtianna.

It was a massive building, much moreso than any other building in Stillwater save for perhaps the inn. I was surprised that a church dedicated to an old religion still commanded so much respect. When I set my eyes on the priestess, however, my surprise waned. This devastatingly beautiful woman seems to swallow me with her eyes.

"How delightful! A traveler! Welcome to Stillwater; it's a wondrous day, is it not?"

I chuckled, "You're in quite the good mood, aren't you?" *Oh yes, I can now very much see why Geshtianna still has a strong following, especially out here where it's cold and lonely...* There was something inherently likable about the woman. I found her to be utterly gorgeous, and I really wasn't normally one to notice such things of another woman. In fact, I hated most other women, and the prettier they were the more I hated them. Perhaps that was because beauty and snobbery often went hand-in-hand.

The priestess smiled at me widely, "It is so kind of you to say so, but I know I am not being as loving as our goddess wishes. I must apologize for being so down today, someone has gone and stolen the

idol of our beloved goddess, Geshtianna, the lady of the vine. And with the festival so close..."

Stolen?! Well that won't do. I need to make an offering. "I could try to find it for you. What would the reward be?" The last part was a reflex.

The priestess didn't seem to notice, or rather she didn't seem to be bothered by my reflexive greed. I supposed that was the way a true priestess of Geshtianna ought to act. "If you were to return our idol, our goddess would bestow her blessing upon you."

"Is that so?" I inquired, "What would such a blessing do for me?"

"A blessing from our goddess would fill your heart with so much joy that you would appear more beautiful to those around you. I have been simply blessed by the goddess, as you can see. Our goddess is a powerful one. Simply possessing the idol itself will make you more appealing to others..."

Why does that sound so very, very familiar? "I see. You have yourself a deal." My mind worked quickly, and as I traced where exactly I'd heard of such a blessing before I began to form a much more clear idea of where I could look for the idol.

"Bless you, sister." The priestess looked at me longingly and actually reached up, caressing my face for the briefest of moments. It put me off just a little bit how much she appeared to love me, a genuine stranger. *Just what kind of a goddess am I making an offering to here?* I shuddered uncomfortably and left the church. My memory worked quickly and I began my search for the fellow the bartender mentioned my first time in Stillwater: Marley.

It was a distant memory, but I was pretty sure the bartender told me about some kind of outcast that suddenly became popular overnight. One day he was hated, and the next he had women flocking to him. It certainly sounded like a promising lead, at any rate. Stillwater was not a large town and so Marley was rather easy to find, especially considering his growing popularity.

There seems to be something not quite right with this fellow. He is extremely Beautiful in a strange sort of way, but it doesn't seem right, somehow.

"Good day to you, madam."

I sighed, tapping my foot impatiently. *Really, now, how could nobody have noticed this in the last few months?* "It is obvious to any who look at you that you have the stolen idol."

He started to sweat and looked around the room suspiciously, possibly searching for escape routes. He was an atrocious liar. "What... ah, could you possibly mean?"

Although I tried to avoid it, my voice took on the tone of a chiding mother. "Why did you steal the idol?"

He practically fell all over himself trying to explain it to me, knowing he couldn't get away with lying, "It has... powers, somehow. It's not magickal, yet it transforms whoever owns it. I was an ugly, hated person. In a town where everyone is loved and welcomed, I was rejected! But now that I own the idol, people treat me with love and respect."

This one's a modern day Kraka-tur, he is. I actually felt sorry for the poor sod. I knew all too well what it was like to be hated and rejected. "Perhaps I could persuade you to part with the statue." I didn't want to hurt him if I could avoid it, nor did I want to just take it from him if I could come to some other resolution.

He looked at me defiantly, "I do not see what you could offer me to convince me to change my mind."

I've seen altars. They're huge. Do you really want to hide out in this house the rest of your days just so people like you for all the wrong reasons? "I will get the priestess to bless you."

"You would do that? That would be most wonderful. I will finally be accepted! Here is the key to the room where I've been keeping the idol."

"Thank you. I knew we could come to an agreement." I took the key from him and, for once, actually used it. I so rarely used keys. There was a massive crate in the room and inside it, clear as day, was the massive golden idol. It was bigger than even the biggest great sword I had ever laid eyes on. I could scarcely believe he'd somehow managed to hide it and not have anybody the wiser. *Stillwater must*

truly be a town of idiots.

Although bulky, the idol itself was surprisingly lightweight. I lifted it up over my shoulders and carried it back towards the church. I heard Sebastian whistle crudely, "Looking fine, Samantha."

"Excuse me?" I almost couldn't believe what he'd just said. "Are you trying to say the idol works, then? I knew that much." *I've got to get rid of this bloody thing.*

He turned several shades of red and went silent, but Virgil took his place. "He's right, though. You look... stunning."

Damnation! Not you, too! I scurried back to the priestess as quickly as I could manage.

She looks at me with lust in her eyes.

"Oh, traveler, it is you. You look different somehow. Perhaps you would spare me a moment to, uh, instruct you in the ways of our goddess?"

Gah! NO! DEFINITELY NOT YOU! Take the damned idol! Take it! "No thank you. I've brought you the idol." I set it down on the ground in front of her and took several steps backwards.

She picked up the idol and placed it on the altar behind her, turning around and bowing to me. "Thank you so much! I bless you in the name of the goddess." *Thank the gods I'm rid of that damned altar.*

I supposed that I ought to live up to my word, "Actually, Marley found it. I think you should bless him as well."

She smiled and clapped her hands. "Oh, what an excellent idea! I wish I had thought of that sooner. It shall be done." I turned to leave, wanting to get the hell away from the damned idol as quickly as possible, but the priestess stopped me. "Wait! Please, join our festival celebration tonight. Have some spiced wine to celebrate."

Now that had been an unexpected offer. *Wine, eh? I'm more of a whiskey kind of woman, but wine's not all bad and I could use a drink.* "Don't mind if I do." I was never one to pass up free alcohol.

The next thing I knew I was waking up on the church floor, bare naked, with no idea of how many hours had passed in the interim. There were at least two dozen other naked men and women all passed out on the floor around me. *Son of a bitch!*

Terry was sleeping on my chest, keeping me at least partially decent, although I was still extremely embarrassed. Virgil, Vollinger, and Sebastian all stared at me disapprovingly.

I turned bright red and jumped up to look for my clothes. Thankfully they were right next to me and I put them on with considerable haste. "How long have I been... er... out? What happened? Good heavens, that must have been some wine! I don't remember a thing!" I chuckled nervously, but I could tell from the way the others struggled to hold back their grins that I wasn't very convincing.

Virgil started chuckling lightly, which got Vollinger and Sebastian started. Soon all three of them were laughing heartily and my face was as red as ever. Virgil held back his laughter just long enough to choke out, "Perhaps it's best that way." *Ha ha, laugh it up then. I can't help it that priestess was... ugh, by the gods you're right... I don't want to remember. I need more wi... NO! Whiskey! I'm NOT having any more wine!*

The worst of it over, I decided I might as well make an offering before leaving, lest I cut my pilgrimage unfortunately short. I walked back out into the courtyard and placed a passion root onto the altar, closing my eyes and saying a brief prayer. Like many times before I felt the warmth of the blessing wash over me and my skin tingled for several moments. *That's the last of the first circle... I'm ready to make my offering to Halcyon now. I wonder what it will feel like to receive a blessing from a greater god?*

Chapter the Forty Sixth: The Long Awaited Homecoming At Last

While I wasn't overly fond of the Eastern grasslands, my dislike of the place certainly wasn't going to stand in the way of my trip to Vooriden. Thankfully, the location Mr. Buxington pointed out on my map was not that terribly far from Tarant. I stopped in Tarant for a quick night's rest in a comfortable bed and then, as quickly as I'd arrived, I departed once again.



The grasslands were as unremarkable as ever, but that was to be expected. At the very least they were an improvement over Tarant, which managed to be uncomfortable despite all of the comforts of the modern age. I was growing quite accustomed to travel, and sleeping out in the wilds. The fresh air almost seemed to do more for my comfort at night than a warm bed.

Vooriden was a particularly small place, just a collection of not even half a dozen small buildings. I actually quite liked the place. The easternmost building seemed to be the main shrine, and the doors were open and welcoming. A small, gnomish priest stood inside, which I found at least a little bit odd. I might've expected a gnome at the altar to Kerlin, but Halcyon was fairly far removed. I supposed greater gods drew all sorts of worshippers, however, and technically I

could count myself among them. "Greetings, sir gnome. Might I ask your name?"

"I am Edwin Wallows, a priest of the Halcyon Order here in Vooriden. How might I help you today?"

"A pleasure, Edwin." *My, but this place is rather impressive in its humility.* "Do you have a moment to speak?"

He nodded at me courteously, "Of course."

I idly wondered if the gnome's attitude and the design of the temple itself had more to do with Halcyon or his status as a greater god. I somewhat feared my inevitable visit to Moorindal, the god of shadows. "What can you tell me about this temple?"

He took a deep, calm breath, addressing me in a fashion almost completely detached from reality. It was almost as though he had no emotion whatsoever. "The Halcyon Order is an ancient one, my friend. Long ago there were many gods, and each god represented a particular virtue. A man chose his gods carefully... religion was a very serious thing..."

"All of the gods were created by the All-Father, who ruled over them and saw that none were more important, or more powerful, than the others. The balance between gods was well-maintained, and no one religion was more powerful than another..."

I was mildly irritated that he seemed to think I didn't know the first thing about where I was, but I supposed that was the fault of the question I'd asked. His story was at least interesting, however. "What happened?"

"Oh, I suppose it's just the way of things to change. The Panarii religion came around, speaking of Nasrudin and his wisdom. Their religion was easier and much more forgiving. The old gods were not that way. And though their voices are faint, you can still hear them... and they still listen to those who call to them. We of the Halcyon Order still worship the god Halcyon..."

Pah. No offense, Virgil, but I'm still not overly fond of the whole Living One business. I don't think you'd feel any different in my shoes. "Can you tell me about your god, Halcyon?"

He smiled, hearing the genuine interest in my voice, "The god Halcyon is the god of Truth. We worship him by looking at ourselves and discovering the truth within. We remove anything that is in conflict with that inner truth. Truth is different for every man... Halcyon only asks that every man be honest with himself when seeking it. Then, and only then, can a man's inner Halcyon emerge." As he finished, Edwin bowed his head towards nobody in particular, likely out of reverence for his god.

At the very least it sounded like an interesting philosophy. I certainly couldn't argue with it, as I'd spent many sleepless nights trying to figure out just what kind of person I really was and trying to come to terms with it. In the end, I'd obviously decided to keep on stealing, so perhaps there was a bit of Halcyon in me after all. "Can I make an offering to Halcyon?"

Edwin frowned, "No... I'm sorry, but no one has made a true offering to Halcyon here in almost 200 years..."

Not even you, or the other residents here? What kind of priest are you?
"Why not?"

"Well, two centuries ago there was an evil pirate named Stringy Pete. He was an absolute devil... there isn't an act of malice, debauchery, or irreverence he didn't commit while he sailed the seas of Arcanum. And then one day he dropped anchor just west of here at our small village..."

"He and his men destroyed everything in town, pillaging what they wanted and burning the rest. When they found the temple... well, let's just say that the old pirate did things to our altar that need never be spoken of again. There hasn't been an offering made on that altar since." Edwin frowned and looked at the altar with sad eyes.

Well... I can understand that, I suppose. "Why don't you get a new altar?"

He struggled trying to explain it to me, "That's not quite as easy as you'd think. You see, there are rules pertaining to the making of altars..."

Can the materials be stolen if the stealer is all right with that? "What are they?"

"Well, the important thing is that the stone came from the ancient dwarven quarry of Torin. The way there is dangerous and the quarry itself is overrun with monsters and a shadow of evil. We are simple folk here; there is no one here who would survive the..."

Yet, for me, it would be trivial... and I was so hoping to make an offering. "I see. Perhaps I could be of assistance?"

He seemed taken aback at my offer for a brief moment, but then grew to appreciate the idea. "Hmmm. Perhaps you might be able to do so. The stone you will need to retrieve will be large and heavy. Unless you are very strong, I recommend you to try and find Murgo... he's a half-ogre who works around here, and he might be able to help you..."

I've always wanted to try one of those things out... this way I can have him tag along with no obligation to keep him. "Where is the Torin Quarry?"

He pointed a small, gnomish finger back towards the way I came, "The Torin Quarry is west of here... near the base of the Stonewall Mountains." I pulled out my map and showed it to him and he pointed to a specific spot on it, not terribly far from Shrouded Hills of all places. "You should be able to find a suitable stone lying around. We are poor folk here... I can't offer you anything but our thanks..."

I waved a hand at him dismissively, "I'd ask nothing more. I'll fetch Murgo and then fetch this stone."

"Thank you so much for your help! Make sure to find Murgo if you'd like his help."

He gestures over me and makes a sign.

"I wish you luck and may the blessing of Halcyon be with you..."

I didn't feel any particular blessings washing over me, which I attributed to the lack of a proper altar. *I'll fix that soon enough.* "Thank you, Edwin. I'll return with the stone!"

I stepped outside of the shrine and looked about the small collection of buildings for only a moment before my eyes settled on a rather

large and ugly gentleman wearing a loose, red shirt. He was unmistakably of ogreish descent, so I walked up to him with a smile. His eyes lit up as I approached and a dumb grin formed across his face, "Uh... hi! I Murgo!"

Oh boy. "Uh, yes... hello, Murgo. Could I speak with you a moment?"

He nodded happily, with seemingly less intelligence than Terry. Actually, Terry was pretty smart for a dog. I tossed him a piece of jerky while I was thinking of it and he devoured it hungrily. Murgo was practically shouting his response at me, "Sure! Murgo likes to talk!"

Great. This is going to be one hell of a journey. I looked at my map, noting unpleasantly that I would probably be spending nearly a month with the ogre, perhaps longer. I cleared my throat, "I spoke with Mr. Wallows... he said you might be available to help me?" "If Mr. Wallows says okay, then maybe I'll help you. What you need help with?"

LIFT ROCK. BIG ROCK. MURGO STRONG. "I need you to carry something for me... a replacement stone for the altar. It's a long journey to get the stone, but I'll need your help carrying it back. Can you carry a large rock, Murgo?"

He stared at me blankly. "Uh... okay. I think I unnerstand..."

I waited there for several moments and Murgo didn't move a muscle. "So... you'll join me?"

His eyes lit up again as he made his decision, "Okay! I help you! But we need go there right away! I have to come back here and help priests again!"

Yes, believe me, I wouldn't dream of bringing you elsewhere. "All right. We'll go directly to the quarry..."



My fears as to the length of the journey and the annoyances of Murgo's company were both rather unfortunately well founded. Murgo chattered nearly non-stop about the same things over and over again, seemingly forgetting that he'd already told us about the time he hit his head on the door frame when he tried to enter the shrine.... seven times. It was a wonder he could even still speak at all. Just when I was starting to wonder if he had any stories that didn't involve hurting himself and then laughing about it we finally started to approach the quarry site.

There were wild bears and even aggressive monkeys all over the quarry, but nothing that actually threatened me. With so many people following me and fighting by my side I felt like a division of the army sent out to quell a wildlife rebellion. I barely even got scratched in putting the beasts down. Avoiding the remaining beasts that hadn't noticed our presence yet, I directed Murgo to a particularly large stone that looked like it had been loosened from the quarry but never properly removed. Murgo lumbered over to it happily and picked the whole damn thing up, carrying it above his head. "It heavy," he whined.

That's all any of us heard about on the entire trip back. "This heavy," yes, Murgo, we know. "It still heavy," yes, Murgo, objects don't get lighter the longer you carry them. "This rock real big," yes, Murgo, that's why we're bringing it back to Vooriden. After only the first day I'd already learned to just ignore him, hoping that the lack of encouragement would cause him to shut up. It didn't. Thankfully, for all his complaining, he didn't really seem to mind.

Murgo carried the stone inside of the shrine when we returned and I approached Edwin to inform him of the good news. "Nice to see you again, Edwin! I've returned with the altar stone."
"You have! That's wonderful! Here, let me take it..."

He does so.

"Whoa! That's heavy! Thank you so much! May Halcyon always light your path and show you the truth that awaits us all."

Even though I was still irritated from putting up with Murgo I was at least happy to have done a good deed, and it looked like I would be able to make that offering after all. *Ugh. I'm never travelling with an ogre again.* "I'd still like to make that offering, Edwin. I'll return when you've carved that stone into a proper altar."

"Certainly," he smiled, "I'll fetch our craftsman right away!"

Murgo wandered off the moment I stepped outdoors, which suited me just fine. I explored the tiny collection of buildings for an hour or so, simply admiring the simplicity of it all. Afterwards, the five of us travelled about an hour into the grasslands, intent on resting there for the night and paying the altar a visit in the morning.

"Don't worry, any of you," I pleaded, "I'll not be taking a half-ogre with us ever again." They all laughed. We took the night to rest up instead of being constantly on the move as usual. It was nice to simply spend the time chatting, resting our overworked legs and feet. There was still pressing business for us to attend to, but I was quite glad I'd decided to embark upon the detours I had. The only other stop I had planned before Black Root was on the way, so I would be arriving in Caladon soon enough. I fell asleep, thinking uneasy thoughts about my inevitable return. By the time I awoke and returned to Vooriden in the morning, the altar was already finished and it looked quite splendid.

I felt Halcyon's blessing wash over me as I made him an offering of an olive tree branch I'd found in the greenhouse at the caverns of the Wheel Clan. At last, I departed for Black Root, intent on making use of the ship Willoughsby was providing for me. Torg's altar was nearly directly on the path to Black Root, hardly a half a day's journey out of my way. It was a dirty and unkempt old thing, in stark contrast to the brand new altar of Halcyon. I offered a ruby at it, receiving a minor blessing in return. I could somehow tell it was different than Halcyon's blessing, lesser in scope... dirtier. I didn't really like the way it felt, and I had a feeling further blessings in this circle would only make that feeling stronger. I couldn't entirely place how or why,

however I knew I didn't like it.

At last I made straight for Black Root. Even though Caladon was still almost a week's journey away by sea, my palms grew sweaty and my heart raced as we approached the docks. There was only a single ship in port and I just knew that it was waiting for me, Willoughsby wouldn't have it any other way. I stepped on board nervously and addressed the captain, "Is this ship bound for Caladon?"

He stared at me with a scrutinizing glare, "Aye, it is if yer name be Samantha Colburn. Otherwise it ain't goin' anywhere." *What is with that manner of speech? Do all ex-pirates get jobs working for the wealthy?*

As off-put as I was, I honestly preferred to be in the hands of a pirate when going past Razor's Cape. They would have considerably more experience navigating such treacherous waters should the worst happen, and it wasn't as though I had any right to consider myself high class anyway. "Yes, I am she. Let's be off, then."

The captain turned and began barking orders loudly at his crewmen, and before I knew it the ship was off. I spent nearly the whole time cooped up in my cabin, refusing to see or talk to anybody... even Virgil. Towards the end of the journey he started to sound quite desperately worried, but I couldn't bring myself to face him. *Now you're all going to see... you're going to see what kind of life I used to lead, you're going to learn about the horrible things I did before I left...*

I weakly composed myself when the ship arrived in Caladon and I strode out onto the docks with false confidence. I took a deep breath, taking in the familiar scent of my homeland that I hadn't realized just how badly I missed until that very moment. It nearly brought tears to my eyes, and would have had I allowed all of the memories that came with it to surface. *Oh, Caladon... I'm home at last.*

I nervously walked to the end of the docks, staring about at each and every worker I passed to see if I recognized them - or, more importantly, if they recognized me. I wanted to bury my face in my dress, and I might've if it wouldn't have impaired my ability to walk properly. After passing the first dozen workers I nearly broke out into a run, trying to just get past all of them without the horror of having

any of them shout, "Hey you! Aren't you Samantha Colburn?! I remember you!"

Luckily for me, my favorite bar was merely a stone's throw away from the docks. I ran up the street in a hurry, ducking into The Toadstool while carefully avoiding looking anybody in the eye on the way. Virgil had a sad look in his eyes, but neither he nor the others said anything. This was my problem to deal with and if I didn't figure out a way to get a handle on it then they certainly couldn't help me. My handle was whiskey.

Please don't recognize me, please don't recognize me. "Say, bartender, could I get a shot of whiskey?"

He looked up at me and I nearly flinched. His gaze passed over me, looking at the group I traveled with, and he looked at me yet again. "Sure thing, madam. That'll be 2 coins." Recognition never flared in his eyes, even though I slightly recognized him. I slapped the 2 coins on the table and flipped through my diary nervously. *I suppose it has been three years, and I've been traveling an awful lot... maybe I'm not as instantly recognizable as I'd feared.*

I still needed the whiskey to calm myself down, as much because I craved it as because of the effect it would have on me. I at least took the effort to enjoy the drink instead of simply tossing it down. "What's new around here, bartender? Caladon's a busy place." "Have you heard what happened to Maxim's factory? Thrashed about by some fools or other. No one knows why."

Maxim's factory? I was planning on stopping there... "Recently?" I arched an eyebrow, the whiskey starting to take effect and relaxing me noticeably.

He shook his head, "No, quite a while ago... but it hasn't been the same since. They never caught whoever did it, and the rumors say the royal family lost faith in Maxim after that. He's lost his funding."

Poor old Maxim... he didn't have that coming to him... "I see... that's too bad. Kind of frightening, isn't it? Whoever did it is still out there."

He chuckled a bit, refilling my whiskey. I flipped him the coin for it and eyed the drink thirstily. "You think that's frightening? Drink up, there are rumors of a werewolf about town lately. A werewolf! Some say they have actually seen the beast prowling the outskirts of town late at night!"

I pushed the drink away, not wanting to get too tipsy at just that moment. Sebastian eyed it up curiously, then shrugged and tossed it down his throat. I didn't really mind... it would've been a shame to waste good, Caladonian whiskey. "I don't believe in any of that nonsense. Really, a werewolf? That's just a fairy tale told to children to scare them into being good. 'Be good, or the werewolf will get you!' Didn't your parents ever tell you that one?"

He smiled at me, seeming to enjoy our little conversation. "Well, maybe the werewolf is just superstition, but that's not all there is to be frightened of."

"Have you heard of the Whitechurch Murderer the guards are looking for? He has us all quite scared around here, he does!"

I started to regret passing up that second drink. "Murderer? ...and he hasn't been caught yet? Are the guards slacking off?"

He shrugged, "I couldn't say, but there have been murders around town every night for the past week! Perhaps the guards are just lazy because the only ones that have been murdered so far have been prostitutes." *You've got to be kidding me. That hits too close to home... I can't just let that stand. Damned lazy guards.*

I shuddered uncomfortably, "Well, thank you for the information friend... and the drinks. I'd best be off."

He nodded, "It's no problem, madam. Say, you've got the look of an adventurer about you if I don't miss my guess..."

I paused briefly, preferring even that unfortunate title to actual recognition. "I suppose you could say that. Have a job for me?"

He shook his head, "No, no, nothing like that... just a bit of advice, a freebie in return for such an enjoyable conversation."

"I've heard that there's a pass through the Stonewall Mountain,

somewhere north of here, that connects the southern halves of the continent. The old adventurer who told me said that he saw a strange stone altar there as well..."

That must be Kaitan... I never knew there was a full mountain pass there. I'll have to remember it. "Many thanks, friend." I tossed another 2 coin on the table for no particular reason and strode out of the bar.

Virgil looked over at me sadly, "Feeling better?"

I'd only had one drink, and truthfully it wasn't nearly enough but I didn't dare get completely blasted. "Not particularly."

He sighed heavily and I could tell something weighed on his mind as well, perhaps not just worrying about me. I felt careless and insensitive all of the sudden, but he continued talking before I could ask him about it, "Do you know where we can find this Victor Misk fellow?"

I nodded satisfactorily, "Of course I do, I could recite his address in my sleep. 9 Gray Wolf Terrace. There are other things of more import to take care of first, however."

He almost seemed to grow angry, "More important...? Just how long do you plan on ignoring our search for the Dark Elves?"

I simply cannot abide by a murderer running rampant in town, targeting the local prostitutes... theirs is a hard lot as it is, and damn it! I can do something about this! I didn't think Virgil would necessarily agree with me. "Well, that isn't the only thing I've put off. Have you so soon forgotten who it was that made it possible for us to arrive here in the first place?"

Sebastian clapped me on the shoulder, "That's right! I may not like Willoughsby, but he's not the kinda man you wanna keep waiting. Best take care of his business before we get to doing anything else, eh?" I didn't particularly like the idea, but he had an excellent point and I was the one who'd brought the subject up in the first place. It wouldn't be wise to get on Willoughsby's bad side... if only I could figure out how to keep him happy while not signing Caladon's soul

and future over to Tarant in the process.

Chapter the Forty Seventh:

Since One Cannot Please Everybody, One Must Focus on Pleasing Oneself

I continued nervously avoiding the stares of my fellow Caladonians as I quickly scurried over towards the castle. I started to slow my pace as I made my final approach, growing more and more nervous that one of the guards would recognize me. If it hadn't been for the slight amount of whiskey keeping my nerves that much more calm, I likely would've turned around and gave up on the whole thing. *Am I really so afraid of what Frederick is going to say? Of what he's been up to since I left?* I pushed the thought out of my mind and focused on simply getting to the castle. I had to concentrate on one thing at a time or I'd never get anything done.

There was an obvious outsider standing in front of one of the lampposts next to the castle. Now that I was back in Caladon, I could easily pick the single Tarantian out from the crowd. When I thought about it, however, I must've looked quite the Tarantian myself. I was adorned with various bits of gadgetry, traveling in the company of a pair of gunners and a man in electrified plate. I cast the guards a nervous glance, half out of the fear that they'd recognize me and half out of simple habit, then I approached the outsider.

He looked up at me, smiling warmly. "Greetings, madam. I am Renard. I have been expecting you. You are sent from Mr. Willoughsby, no?"

His immediate recognition of me was distinct proof that I no longer looked like I belonged. I took comfort in that, although it was a guilty comfort. "Yes, Renard. I'm here for the negotiations..."

He lowers his voice.

"You are not from Caladon? No, I am a politician, and I know that sometimes the game is hard, but these Caladonians... ah! I've never seen so much back-biting and boot-licking in all my life!"

Sure, rub it in, why don't you? Insult my homeland while you're at it! Go ahead! Bastard. "...Interesting. Do you have any advice?"

He laughed out loud at my question before answering, "Yes... hold on to your wallet! So much money passes from hand to hand here... I've received bribes from beggars, here! Bless me, I have!" He made a Panarii sign across his chest, bowing his head religiously. "I pray to the gods that I survive this wicked place. Ahhh!"

I cleared my throat irritably, "Let's get to the point, Renard..."

He stammered a bit, starting to catch my annoyance, "My apologies, madam. I've just never had a more terrible time... no matter." He straightened his coat, getting ready for business. "You will proceed through these doors, straight ahead through, and to the large doors at the end of the inner courtyard. The guards there will be instructed to let you pass once we have finished our conversation here. Once through those doors, you will walk directly to the end of that long hallway to another set of large doors. Through those doors is the council. You will proceed to the podium, and the advisors will begin asking you questions.

"Once you've finished the negotiations, you will obtain the signed agreement from them, and leave the premises immediately. Mr. Willoughsby will meet you right here with me once the negotiations are done. You will be paid then. And, some personal advice... you will no doubt be approached by not a few persons on your way to the advisors chambers. These individuals will represent various interests here in Caladon, and will attempt to sway your position on any number of the points detailed in the dossier you've received. Do not speak with them, take no money from them, and for the love of the gods do not change your position on any of the points! The very economic future of Arcanum hinges on the acceptance of Caladon into the Unified Kingdom! Do you understand?"

I sighed, displeased. *Just great... a whole hall of influential Caladonians... I've probably robbed half of them.* "I understand. Good day to you, Renard..."

"Good I will send word to the guards to expect you....good luck in the negotiations...."

I turned away from Renard and walked through the doors hesitantly. It certainly felt odd to be making my way into the palace, and in broad daylight no less. I wondered what Willoughsby had to say to get them to acquiesce to my presence. I couldn't believe that none of them recognized me by name, even if they didn't recognize me by sight. Then again, it had been three years since I was even in Caladon, and over ten since I'd been arrested. *Do noblemen even have memories that long?* My past probably meant a whole lot more to me than it did to any of them anyway.

No sooner had I crossed the courtyard and entered the hallway leading towards the throne room than I was very nearly accosted by a woman just desperate to speak with me. "Greetings, madam!" Her voice was all cheery and she forcibly grabbed my hand for a friendly shake. "Could I ask for a few moments of your time?"

"Er... of course," I blurted out without thinking. *Dammit, I'm not supposed to speak with these people! I don't WANT to speak with these people!*

She smiled falsely and launched into a memorized speech, "Thank you. Thank you ever so much! I understand the position you are in, and I won't be long at all. I am a representative from the Department of the Treasury here in Caladon..."

Treasury? At the mention of where she worked the woman very suddenly started looking familiar to me. *Agnes...? NO!* She must have seen the recognition flare in my eyes, for she paused in her speech noticeably and stared at me just a bit more closely. I nearly winced under her piercing gaze, but it wouldn't have helped matters one bit. Her jaw dropped open just slightly.

She looks ready to say something but then stops.

"Oh, it's YOU. I'd been briefed that they had chosen the other fellow." She seems to lose interest.

"Your... abilities... at setting prices aren't what we consider favorable

to these negotiations. I'm afraid we've nothing further to talk about." I could hear the falseness in her voice, but I was secretly grateful that she aimed to remain polite instead of calling me a thief outright. I had to give her credit for making up such a believable excuse in only a moment. "Good day, then, madam." She barely even heard me, her mind seemed to rather suddenly be elsewhere. She kept looking at me, then turning away again as soon as I noticed. *Go ahead, get a good look. Am I really that fascinating?*

I continued down the hallway and a myriad of other shouts and demands were hurled at me, some more politely than others. "Madam, madam! I represent the Department of Transportation," one man shouted as I passed.

Another man shouted from the opposite side of the room, "You, madam, are a true technologist! We need allies such as yourself in the coming negotiations!" I resisted the urge to give in to his flattery.

I only stopped when I passed by a particularly gruff-looking, scarred dwarf. Perhaps it was my natural curiosity about a dwarf in Caladon, or perhaps I naively hoped he somehow knew something about the Black Mountain Clan. "Greetings, sir dwarf."

He nodded at me curtly, "Thank you for stopping to speak with me, I will keep this brief and to the point. My name is General Veers. I represent the Caladonian Military. I can tell you're a woman well-versed in the ways of war." He may have been right, but I certainly wasn't proud of it. "You might just understand our position here in the negotiations, and perhaps be able to give us some assistance..."

I sighed, "Let's hear it." *Not bloody likely, dwarf.*

"You are aware that the Unified Kingdom requires that half of our army be under the Unified Battalions. We understand this position, but we believe that Caladon needs to keep her standing army indefinitely. If you happen to agree and see that it becomes a part of the agreement, we'd give you a gold piece stipend."

He winks at me.

"The spoils of war..."

Ugh. Of all people, why did Renard have to be right? "I can see the

validity of your point. I'll consider it..." I wouldn't have been a good negotiator at all if I couldn't lie my way out of the situation, so that's just what I did. The dwarf smiled at me, not catching on to my ruse in the slightest.

I continued my walk, passing by the grubby gnome trying to catch my attention with freshly minted coins, and past the man shouting about how it was crucial to Caladon's future to ensure labor unions were outlawed as a part of the agreement. I especially passed by the heavily perfumed woman who looked like she'd been expecting a male negotiator and was planning on taking advantage of that fact. *Ugh. How much are you getting paid for this one, anyway? Even whores should have standards. Then again, I suppose I'm not one to talk.*

I did take special notice of the man near the end of the hall, however. He looked to be not bothered at all by the proceedings, not caring to shout to attract my attention. By the way he was dressed I knew he had money and was likely to try and bribe me, but my curiosity got the better of me as usual and I wandered over to say hello. "Why, hello there, sir."

He smiled, "Hello, madam. Could I speak with you a moment?"

I'm not going to like this, but sure. "Certainly."

He bows slightly.

"Your Excellency, madam. I won't take up much of your precious time. I am a member of the Caladonian Parliament."

For all the lack of respect I had for anybody in a position of power, the gentleman before me was quite an excellent representative for the parliament. He was attractive and well-dressed, not to mention confident. "How can I help you?" I should've been more put off by his affiliation, but at least he was a sight better than the rest of the sods in the hallway.

His speech was smooth and elegant, and I very much wanted to believe whatever it was he was trying to sell me, "As you know, Caladon is a monarchy, but we do have an elected Parliament with limited power. We also understand that the Unified Kingdom has a Parliament, and that each member has a certain number of votes, based on size and seniority. If we could persuade you to our way of

thinking, it might benefit us both..."

Hmm, yes, that was mentioned in the dossier... Not only was he excellently persuasive, but he seemed to bring up a damned interesting topic. The more thought I put into it the more I realized that perhaps I was interested in what the man had to say after all.

"And what is your way of thinking, sir?"

"We feel that Caladon should have 10 votes from the very beginning. We realize that this is the same number as Tarant, but we need to look at the Unified Kingdom for... make sure that this is done, then we can give you gold pieces for expenses."

"Perhaps. I'll consider it." I turned away from the man and continued walking towards the throne room, but my mind was already half made up. *It's really not a bad idea at all. I can't let Tarant bully Caladon around with more votes... I just can't do that to my homeland.* With that thought, I walked straight into the throne room, leaving behind the awful noise of the hallway.

As the door shut behind me the noise was drowned out completely and I became acutely aware of the extreme silence in the throne room. There was a podium set up in front for me to speak at and the advisors were positioned behind that as my audience. I stepped up to it nervously. "Good day, gentlemen," I managed to croak.

"Dear madam, we are thankful for your time today and appreciate a few moments of your time to clarify the remaining points in the Articles of Membership. Once you have answered our questions, then we will vote as to what our position will be concerning Caladon's membership in the United Kingdom. Might we begin?"

I nodded my head, "Please..." I was still so nervous that I was actually shaking, but with the whiskey having finally left me I could only rely on the support of my companions behind me to calm my nerves. No doubt if they'd felt I wasn't the right woman for the job they would've said something. I had to believe in myself as strongly as they all seemed to believe in me. It was true, my negotiation skills were top notch... and the hard sell had been convincing Willoughbsby of that fact. All that remained was just talking to my peers. It was perhaps inaccurate to think of them as peers, but they were far moreso than Willoughbsby was.

"Please specify what Tarant's position will be on the issue of the construction of a railroad here in Caladon..."

Hmm... Willoughsby will throw a fit if I propose that Caladon controls the railroads, and I don't really like that idea myself anyway. I know these penny pinchers would just pay for it out of Maxim's salary, and that old man doesn't deserve that. On the other hand, I can't fully support Tarant so early or these advisors will distrust me right off the bat. Willoughsby said he'd accept shared ownership in the dossier, and that's just how it's got to be. "SHARED ownership of the railroads and stations in Caladon."

"On the subject of magick and its uses within city walls?"

Why ever would I support anything but what has worked in the past? "Use of magick must be regulated, as well as where it happens."

Willoughsby be damned, I knew better on that front. It was the secret to how Caladon had made technology and magick coexist so peacefully for so many years and no damned agreement was going to ruin it now if I had any say in it. Luckily, I did. I smiled wickedly at that thought. I would have loved to see the look on everybody's smug little faces when they read the paper announcing my negotiation. "And what of the technological trade issues, more specifically the economic and social status of Mr. Gilbert Bates?"

To hell with Bates, he's a bastard of a man.... ugh, but Willoughsby would try to have me hanged. I'll have to go for a moderate approach if I want to appease both him and my conscience. "Bates will enjoy limited trade concessions within Caladon." At least that way he wouldn't be completely discouraged from business, making Willoughsby happy, but Maxim would still stand a fighting chance. I made a note to give Maxim the schematics I'd stolen from Bates' factory, since I'd been planning on visiting the old codger anyway.

"And the military? What will happen to our army and navy?"

What of it? The less killing the better. "Half of the army and navy will serve in the Unified Battalions." I didn't want to lose the advisors' trust just yet or I'd have argued for a full dismantling of the Caladonian army, but if I did that I would fail in my negotiations for certain. Whatever the details, it was still important for Caladon to join the Unified Kingdoms.

"And what of the so-called membership tax that is placed on all new entrants into the Unified Kingdom?"

Now this is a good spot to impress Willoughsby, to make up for my other concessions. Although it felt somewhat like a betrayal of my homeland, I knew that such taxes would primarily be paid by the rich. The poor quite literally couldn't pay any more than they already did, and it certainly wasn't going to come out of the king's pocket.

"The heavier the tax, the more Caladon reaps the benefits..." I could see the sympathetic look on their faces and I knew the advisors were buying it, even if it was a load of nonsense. I tried to think of it as justice against the upper class. They could afford it anyway.

"And what of the rule that all Unified Kingdom members must discontinue use of their own currencies and change to the Unified Gold standard?"

I desperately wanted to argue for an immediate changeover, but I couldn't bear to think of what would happen to all of the laborers and the hard working poor who didn't have the time to get to a moneychanger so quickly. "Caladon may use her own currency for 3 more years." I didn't think most workers would be holding onto the same coin for even a year, let alone three, yet the upper class would have a hard time converting their massive piles of wealth in such a short period of time. I considered it yet another victory, though I could tell I hadn't won any points with the advisors on that one.

Oops.

"And What of shipping routes-- who will receive privileges and concession?"

There was a distinct conflict in my mind as to how to respond to the question. I wanted to regain the trust of the advisors once again, but I didn't want to do so at the expense of Willoughsby's good will.

Furthermore, while most of the tax money went to the larger shipping companies, there were some small time traders and ship captains that got by only through that tax. "Caladon will collect a toll from U.K. members for 10 years." It seemed like a compromise on all fronts. Willoughsby was willing to allow it according to his dossier, and the advisors would see 10 years as quite generous. Furthermore, it gave both the shipping companies and the smaller traders time to react accordingly. If nothing else it was fair.

"What of labor unions? What laws might be enacted concerning them?"

While I was all in favor of worker's rights, neither the advisors nor Willoughsby would be particularly happy if I argued in favor of them.

I felt that another compromise was the best diplomatic decision at the time. "Labor unions will have limited rights in Caladon."

"And on the number of votes Caladon will have in the Unified Parliament? Where do you stand on that issue?"

"Caladon will have the same number of votes that Tarant has." There was no hesitation on that front. I'd made up my mind on that subject even before entering the room. Willoughsby would be furious on that point, but I thought he might let it pass by in favor of the heavy taxes Caladon would be paying. The advisors, needless to say, were quite receptive to my offer.

"Tarant is currently dependent upon Caladon for grain, and they make a lot of their money through taxes on exported produce. What concessions will be made to our farmers who enjoy a demanding market?"

I did feel pity for the poor farmers who engaged in back-breaking labor for little reward, but the simple fact of it was that their taxes went straight to the king anyhow. If the taxes were eliminated the king might even be forced to pay the farmers out of his pocket to keep grain production high, and he most certainly would do so if he had to. "The tariff will stand for an additional three years." I'd won a lot of points with the advisors with my last position and they knew an offer like this would never come around again. I had a feeling they would see the grain tax as a small point in comparison.

"Thank you for your time in this matter, madam. Give us a moment to discuss what we have heard today and to make a decision concerning what our recommendation will be..."

"Of course." The advisors turned to each other and began whispering furiously, clearly having a disagreement on the subject. I certainly hadn't made the decision easy on them, that was for sure, but I felt confident in my decisions. I had a feeling Willoughsby would tolerate it, and I was pretty certain that the advisors would have a hard time passing it up as well. I'd minimized the damage to the poor and maximized the damage to the rich, so I was pretty happy too. All in all it was a fairly acceptable arrangement.

Sebastian looked at me with an expression of utter shock, "I gotta say, girl, that was some mighty fine mincing of words you did there. Willoughsby picked the right woman, no doubt."

Vollinger took a small bow as well, "Indeed, my respect for you only

increases the longer that I share your company. You're a fine negotiator, Samantha."

I looked over towards Virgil, eager to see what he thought of my performance, but he was staring off to the side of the room silently. He didn't seem to want to partake in our conversation. *Virgil... please, don't be upset with me...* The advisors were starting to get quite animated in their hushed discussion and I chuckled a bit at the dilemma I'd presented them. I tried to ignore Virgil and I smiled at the other two. "Thank you for the kind words, both of you. Truly, your opinions mean a lot to me."

"Aw hell," Sebastian muttered, "It's no big deal. I just meant what I said is all." Vollinger nodded cheerily. I was about to respond when the discussion amidst the advisors started quieting down and I turned to see them all nodding their heads. The chairman turned back around to address me.

"After some deliberation, madam, we have decided to accept the terms outlined here today and to recommend membership in the Unified Kingdom based on them. We will make the King aware of our decision. He will be leaving immediately for Tarant. Thank you once again for your time... we shall speak with His Majesty about this as soon as possible. Please take a signed copy of the agreement."

He hands it to me.

"Good day..."

I accepted the agreement that he handed me. "I thought you would say that. Thank you, and good day."

Smiling I tapped Virgil on the shoulder to make sure he was still with us. He turned and looked at me, startled, then realized the meeting was over. He sheepishly hung his shoulders and followed along as we left the throne room. The outer hallway was significantly quieter than it had been when I entered, and there were only two men left. One was the man from the parliament whom I'd spoken with.

"There she is!" He cheered at me excitedly, "You've done well, madam! My congratulations and thanks!" He discreetly handed me a bag full of coins which I pocketed hurriedly. "I wish you the best of luck in all your endeavors."

I shook hands with him, smiling. *I'd have done what I did anyway, but I'm happy to accept your gold regardless.* "Thank you, and good day." The man departed, disappearing down a nearby hallway, and I decided it was my turn to disappear as well. On my way out I saw the prince pacing back and forth nervously in the lobby. I didn't pay him too much attention and I crossed back through the courtyard and out of the gate. My mind wandered on the subject, however, and just as I was leaving the palace grounds I realized he was probably waiting for the Cumbrian princess. *Hmm... so she never arrived, did she?*

No sooner had I taken two steps outside when Mr. Willoughsby himself greeted me cheerily. "Hello there, young lady!" *Hmph, 'young'. Always the charmer, I see.* "Well done, well done! I've heard that you secured an agreement with the council! Let me have a look!" I handed the paper off to him.

"Hmmm. Interesting. I must say you've done quite well here. Not perfect, but when do you ever get EVERYTHING you want?" He laughs, patting me on the shoulder.

"I'm most impressed with your work here, madam. I am going to pay you 1,000 gold pieces for your skilled negotiation..."

Dear god, he throws gold around like candy. I certainly wasn't one to refuse money, so I tossed the bag in my purse quickly. "And you'll train me to be a master in persuasion as well, sir?" An agreement was an agreement, regardless of how much he'd paid me.

He didn't seem to be offended, so he must have realized the same thing. "Yes! Of course! Now the important thing of negotiation is..." He whispered in my ear so that the others around me couldn't hear, and indeed the details of what he whispered are such that they likely ought not be disclosed to anybody aside from myself. If everybody knew, then it would hardly be a secret. "And there you have it! All of the secrets of the persuasive arts!"

I smiled and curtsied gently, "Thank you, sir..."

"Say no more! You've rendered Tarant and all of the Unified Kingdom a great service! You'll be remembered for many years, madam!"

"Good day to you, Mr. Willoughsby." *Well... I suppose that all went better than I expected it to. Now... do I dare pay Frederick a visit?* The uncomfortable lump forming in my stomach suggested that either the

answer was 'no', or that I needed a whole lot more whiskey.

Chapter the Forty Eighth:

Avoidance

I tried to will myself towards Frederick's house, a house I called home for many years, but I just couldn't do it. Even just thinking about it filled me with dread, and when I inevitably gave in to that feeling I felt like a fool. *What in blazes am I so afraid of?* I noticed a small supply shed on the side of the road, belonging to the Caladonian Guard. For old time's sake I picked the lock on it and snuck inside.

It wasn't even as though I really needed the money, I mostly did it out of nostalgia, which seemed like an awful reason to steal from anybody, even the guard. As a compromise I only took half of the valuables in the shed. *I can't avoid him forever. I don't want to avoid him forever, I just... what will he say? It's been over three years...* I sighed, at last heading for Dragon's Turnabout.

So many memories flooded over me as I walked through the well-decorated streets. I passed by the Museum of Caladon, where Frederick and I had spent many nights chatting about various pieces of history. I still remembered the look on his face when he came home one evening and spotted the old Queen's necklace sitting out on the desk in his study. He couldn't believe I'd actually had the nerve to steal it. When he got over the shock we both laughed, and he put it in his glass case.

"Tyron?" Virgil's voice snapped me out of my reverie. "Samantha, look, the name on this building is A. Tyron. Aren't we looking for him?"

I glanced over at it: 22 Dragon's Turnabout, A. Tyron. "Right you are, Virgil! Good eye!" I was secretly thankful for yet another distraction.

I knocked on the door and waited several moments for an answer. A

younger man with shabby, wrinkled clothes and a week's worth of stubble answered the door. He took one look at the axe on my belt and jumped back suddenly, "What do you want? What are you doing here? You're working for THEM, aren't you?"

Yes, I've definitely found the right man. "Working for who?"

His eyes darted back and forth nervously as though he were trying to decide which window would be best to dive out of. "You know who. The day has finally come, is that it? Arthur Tyron has become too dangerous to be allowed to stay alive?"

Calm down, good fellow. I'm not here to kill you. "Look, Arthur... Cesare sent me. I've brought the skulls." I pulled them out of my purse and held them out to him.

He examines them with barely contained excitement.

"Yes, yes! It is all coming together now."

I grew increasingly annoyed that nobody seemed to want to explain a damn thing to me even after I'd somehow managed to track Tyron down against all odds. "What is?"

His voice was hysterical, "I have uncovered a plot the ramifications of which could bring down the government of Tarant! But I will need your help to finish my work..."

I very nearly rolled my eyes. "Is that so?"

His eyes dart around again, suspiciously.

"Haven't you ever wondered where all these half-ogres are coming from? A hundred years ago a half-ogre was a rare thing, usually the result of raping and pillaging. But humans the size of a half-ogre..."

Actually... yes, I have. I spoke with Ogdin about that very subject when I visited the Isle of Despair. "Yes, that is rather strange."

He leaned in closely to me and I could smell the stench of sweat on his skin and clothing. I shied away just in time to avoid a droplet of it. "They are breeding them! They've enslaved women and are forcing them to mate with Ogres, I tell you!"

It did make a paranoid sort of sense, but I didn't put much stock in an

enigmatic 'they'. "Who is? Who's doing this?"

"The gnomes! The gnomes of the Industrial Council in Tarant! Haven't you ever noticed that every gnome seems to have at least one or two half-ogres always following him around? They're breeding them for protection."

Actually... I've noticed that, too... most of them are bloody useless, but he's right, the gnomes do tend to employ a lot of half-ogres. Could it really be true? This isn't just some figment of Tyron's imagination? "How did you find out about all of this?"

He shook his head dismissively. "Oh, I've been on the trail a long time, I have. And now that you have brought me the skulls, I'm ready to close in and grab the proof I need to expose them. It's just that... well, I'm not much in the way of physical prowess. I need someone I can trust to collect the evidence for me, as I don't think I would survive. It is sure to be a treacherous endeavor!"

I sighed heavily, knowing that it would come down to me, as usual. *I'm really quite surprised at the number of capable men that would defer any dangerous jobs to a woman. Chivalry is truly dead.* "What does all this have to do with the skulls?"

He grabbed onto my shoulders, trembling excitedly as he spoke, "The Siamese twins were the result of their first twisted breeding experiments! They tried to breed elves with orcs to produce a breed of extremely strong, resilient mages that they could then control. This was before it was obvious that technology would one day rule Arcanum, of course. The twins were the only viable offspring to come from those experiments. They were scheduled to be put to death, but they disappeared from the laboratory before their termination could take place. They appeared in high society some 20 years later. We believe they must have been under the protection of a powerful ally of ours on the council for them to have survived that long."

There was definitely a certain doubt beginning to form in my mind as to where the truth ended and this madman's warped imagination began. I didn't doubt that there was at least some truth to it, however. "Who is this ally of yours on the council?"

"No one knows. I have communicated with him in the past through

codes in the newspaper and other surreptitious means."

Ugh, got it... there is no such ally, and the Siamese twins are doubtlessly unrelated as well. "I could possibly help you. What would I need to do?" I couldn't ignore the possibility of breeding experiments. That seemed all too realistic.

He picked up a tattered and worn journal full of unreadable scribbles and flipped through it impatiently. "Through my research, I've discovered the most likely location for this breeding facility is a small island I've dubbed 'Half Ogre Island', near Thanatos. You would need to find a way into their laboratories and bring me some sort of evidence I can use to expose them to the world!"

I nodded at him affirmatively, "You've piqued my interest. I will do it."

"Excellent!" His shout echoed throughout the mostly barren room and he grabbed my map from my hands almost before I could even finish taking it out of my purse. "Here... here is the location of the island." He marked my map with a dot. "And don't speak with anyone about this, it could be... unhealthy, for both you and me."

Perhaps not in the same way you think, but I'd definitely like to avoid the strange looks that follow. "Agreed. I shall return with your proof." On my way out of the building I spied a guard standing watch across the street with an incredibly bored look on his face. I was trying to work back up the nerve to see how Frederick was doing, so in the meantime I decided to see what the guard was up to.

The guard addresses me gruffly.

"Citizen, this is no place for you. Move along."

I wouldn't be turned away nearly so easily. "What is happening here?"

He sighed, obviously disinterested, but seemed willing enough to accept the distraction I offered him from an otherwise dreary job.

"Have you not been reading the newspapers? There's a murderer on the loose. This is where one of his grisly murders occurred."

I gritted my teeth. *How careless of me! I've been so worried about Frederick that I nearly forgot... I cannot let this stand.* "Perhaps I can

help find the murderer."

"Hah! That's all we need—an amateur detective. You'd best be speaking with Chief Inspector Henderson if you want to pursue your fantasy any further. I am sure he will welcome your offer of help with his characteristic joy."

"Where can I find this chap?" No amount of taunting was going to put me off of it. It was something that I simply had to do.

The guard's armor clanked noisily as he pointed in a vaguely easterly direction. "At the police station, of course. 5 Saints Ave, off Temple Road."

I don't need directions. I know right where that is. "Thanks." I went straight there. I fully expected Virgil to start complaining, but instead he was simply silent. He'd been quite silent ever since we'd arrived in town, actually. I didn't think he would be quite that upset over my hesitation in searching out Victor, as it certainly wasn't the first time I got sidetracked by seemingly less important tasks. What is bothering you, Virgil...? ...and why won't you talk about it?

I entered the police station willingly for perhaps the first time in my life. The inspector was a gnomish fellow that I eyed suspiciously, thinking back to the job I'd just accepted from Tyron. I shrugged it off, however. *Just because he's a gnome doesn't mean he's in on the conspiracy... if there's a conspiracy. It's ludicrous to buy into everything Tyron said. Why, there's not even a half-ugh, almost didn't notice him standing there. For heaven's sake, I really doubt a member of the gnomish industrial council would be working as a police inspector for Caladon!*

The inspector noticed me approaching and glanced up from his desk, "Yes, can I help you, madam?"

"Good day, inspector. I've heard of the horrible murders going on about town, and I wanted to offer whatever assistance I could. Perhaps I can be of some help to you." I tried to sound polite, fighting back the irrational thoughts stuffed into my head by Tyron. The memory of the guard's face when he directed me to the inspector wasn't helping, either. *I really want to help put an end to these murders badly, don't I? Since when did I get so damned noble?* The inspector looked me over carefully before cracking a smile.

"Well, I am pleased that somebody with some semblance of intelligence has taken an interest in this case."

He turns around and shouts to the room.

"ALL I GOT WORKING FOR ME ARE A GROUP OF SLACK-JAWED SIMIANS!"

After the amount of crime I got away with in this damned town years ago, I'd be inclined to agree with you. "Thank you. I think. What can you tell me of the murders?"

He seemed rather tired and open to letting me do as I pleased. "Well, the journalists have taken to calling this maniac the Whytechurch killer, after his favorite section of town. Here's a list of the murder sites. If you're interested in helping, you could go look these places over."

Poor girls... you were lured out into some rich bastard's home, then brutally murdered... I will track this bastard down, I assure you. "Are there any clues you know of that could help me out?"

The inspector seemed at a loss for words, apparently lacking in most information of a useful sort. "Well, this bloke likes his prostitutes, he does. We got one in a cell back there. She actually caught a glimpse of the degenerate while he was cutting up a friend of hers. She demanded we lock her up for protection it spooked her so bad. You can go speak with her, if you care to."

"I see, that sounds like a capital idea. I'll go do that. Good day." I turned towards the back room, wanting more and more to catch the guilty bastard the more I heard about the foul murders. I approached the woman in the back room. She seemed a terrible nervous wreck.

She turned as I approached, looking me up and down uneasily. "A woman constable? What are you doing to find that terrible man?" Her hands were shaking horribly and they simply wouldn't stop. Her eyes kept darting all around the room as though she expected the killer to somehow track her down here.

I brushed off her rudeness, wanting instead to help her as best as I could. There were few that could garner such sympathy from me, but

she was certainly one of them. "I'm no constable, madam, just an interested citizen."

"Are you some sort of degenerate, madam? There is a madman on the loose out there and you are interested? This is nothing to play at, good woman."

I assure you, I'm not playing. I'd rather not leave these incompetents to look towards your safety when I stand a much better chance of helping you myself. "I am simply offering my help to put an end to these murders."

She stared at me and her face softened a bit. She could see the sympathy in my eyes. "I can tell you what I've seen. It was the most horrible vision I ever hope to behold. That pale skinned, slight shadow of a man, kneeling over Emily... and the blood! It was a sight I shall never forget."

I frowned, not liking the sound of what was going on in the slightest. It seemed the killings were cruel and methodical. "Start from the beginning, if you would." I was just glad I recognized neither the woman, nor the Emily she spoke of. I felt dreadful enough without hearing about the death of one of my old acquaintances, or seeing one in such a state. That was one good thing about having been gone for so long.

"We were out working and Emily had forgotten something or other at her home. So I waited for her outside, but she never came out. When I went inside to look for her is when I saw him..."

Now that's a tad strange. "You didn't see him go into the house?"

She thought about it for a moment, noticing just how strange it was. "No, and there is really no way to enter the house that I couldn't see from where I was standing."

The man was either a mage of some sort, or the master of prowling. "What did the man look like?"

"It was difficult to tell really, all that blood..."
she shivers.

"As I said, he was a slight man, possibly an elf. He didn't appear to be possessing much physical power. He must have cast some sort of

magic on her."

Definitely a mage, then. One that can either teleport, or turn invisible. I'll have to show him exactly what it's like to go up against a true technologist! "Is there anything else?"

She shuddered uncontrollably and looked at me with hope in her eyes. "Please kill the bastard that cut up Emily. He deserves to suffer as she did!"

"Justice will be served, madam. Good day." *Hmph. Justice... who am I to speak of justice?*

I left the police station and returned to the house where the guard turned me away earlier. I showed him the note from the investigator and he merely nodded at me, stepping aside so that I could enter the house. The grisly scene I found upon entering was every bit as horrible as I'd expected it to be. The poor woman was lying on the ground cut in several places, with various appendages or chunks of flesh having been completely severed. It looked as though all of the blood in her body had long since drained out onto the floor and stained the wood. It was utterly macabre, and my emotional detachment was the only thing that made it even remotely bearable.

On a hunch I looked around the room for any other entrances, trying to get any evidence that I could. Much to my surprise, the prostitute had been wrong and there was actually an alternate entrance. It was a trap door off in the corner of the room. I walked over to it and tried to open it to no avail.

Try as I might, and I was no weakling, it simply wouldn't move. Sebastian gave me a hand in trying to move it as well, but even the two of us combined could not even budge it in the slightest. *I suppose it's not terribly likely he came in this way after all.* I left that house and walked around to the Whytechurch district to look at the next most recent murder on the list. The guard at the entrance greeted me as I approached, "The inspector had word sent we should be expecting you. I don't know how you did it, but I'd tip my hat to you were I wearing one. Go on in, if you've the stomach for it."

I'm sure this sight will be every bit as gruesome as the last, but I'll live. If it brings me closer to finding the killer, I must endure. I walked inside. The condition of the poor girl's body in this house was the same as the last one, although decidedly less fresh. There was blood splattered in places not even all that close to the body, which made an unfortunate amount of sense when I looked at the state of the corpse. *He will pay... he will pay dearly for this.*

I noticed a similar trap door over in the corner of the room. Now I was all but certain that it had some kind of connection, but still I could not manage to move it even the slightest little bit. I decided to return to the investigator and report my findings to him. "Pardon me, Inspector Henderson.... could you tell me anything about the trap doors in the homes of the two most recent murders? I can't seem to open them, but since they are present in both homes and the only witness we have says she never saw the killer enter I suspect they are related."

"Those are remnants from old city sewers; no sentient being in all of Arcanum is strong enough to lift them! When the sewer maintenance blokes need to access them, they use some type of machine. Besides, there is another murder to worry about now."

That doesn't make any sense... "The man Renee described was slight of build, though."

He shrugged, scowling at me as though I were an idiot. "What is your point? It would not have mattered if he was the strongest Ogre on Arcanum. It would take several to live one of those old covers without machinery."

Fine, ignore it then. "It seems strange, is all. Well, where did this new murder occur?"

He handed me another small note, "It's at 23 King's Way, The Mushroom Inn, in one of the rooms there."

"Thank you, inspector. I shall return." I took the note he offered and strolled back down King's Way towards the inn. My eyes darted around the street, staring intently at anybody and everybody that I passed. If the murder was so recent I was almost sure I could spot the

killer trying to make his escape and I could get my vengeance. Alas, I spotted nobody like that.

There was a guard already at the scene of the crime, waiting for me when I arrived. He directed me into the proper room and stood guard outside while I investigated.

By the gods, what happened here?! The new murder scene was unlike either of the previous two. I couldn't determine what was more noticeable, the gigantic green letters on the ground or the high unrecognizable corpse strewn about the room. I wanted to vomit at the mere sight of it. The woman's legs had been cut off at the knees, and her arms at the elbows. She'd been disemboweled quite messily, her insides having been viscerally splattered all over the floor and walls. There was, sadly, nothing left of her face. Her teeth had been cracked and broken, and the front of her skull was smashed in completely. Whoever did this was incredibly strong, violent, and unstable.

Virgil turned and simply waited outside, unwilling to tolerate such a sight. I couldn't blame him in the slightest, I didn't want to tolerate it either. Sebastian darted out of the room as well, though much more quickly. I heard sounds of him retching in the grass outside. Vollinger and Terry stayed with me, although the latter whined while the former held a thick cloth up to his nose. *This is horrible... I've got to focus on what's important so I can get out of here.* I stared at the letters on the ground, *L'anamelach*, pondering on their significance.

There was difficulty determining if they were actually painted or if they were made with some sort of ink, or even green blood, but there was no doubt that the letters spelled out a word I didn't recognize. I wasn't even sure why the inspector had sent me to look, for surely he had to have been aware of them... unless he was the worst inspector ever to have gotten the title, which I somehow didn't doubt.

I rushed away from the scene in a hurry, lest I also lose the contents of my own stomach. Sebastian looked at me with pleading eyes as we walked back towards the police station, "I-I'm sorry... I just... dammit, we're gonna get the guy that did that, right? We're gonna give this

sicko some Boil justice?"

"You're damn right we will," I didn't even think before answering. "...and you don't have to apologize... I was seconds away from joining you." He laughed uncertainly, stopping abruptly and putting his hand to his stomach with a pained look on his face. I burst into the police station and glared at the gnome, "Inspector Henderson... are you aware that the name L'amelach was scrawled in the room of the most recent murder, seemingly written in green blood?" I stared at him intently, trying to gauge his response.

"Aatlich! That sounds like a demon name."

He holds his head in his hands.

"I hate demons. Did I ever tell you about that Amilech demon that ran amok around here? I had to go slogging through some god-forsaken swamp to find some ridiculous-looking dagger to kill it. Why can't you buy a good demon-killing dagger at the corner store?"

So you didn't know. All right, you are officially useless. "But the prostitute said it was a man of slight build, possibly an elf." I stressed my earlier point once again.

He shrugged, "That is extremely peculiar. I do not understand much about this whole demon business, myself. Just know I hate them, is all."

I supposed that he hated them enough to simply avoid the whole investigation, as long as it was only prostitutes being killed. "What do I do now?" At least one of us wasn't going to let it rest.

The look he gave me then was a combination of disgust, at what I couldn't tell, and also one of hope. He rather liked the idea of me doing his job for him, I could tell. "You need to find a demonologist to talk to. I'd send you to talk to the demonologist who helped me out, but he had a, uh, rather unfortunate run in with the demon I was hunting. Demons don't like those demonologists giving away their secrets, eh?"

I sighed. *I'm fairly certain that the university at Tarant has a demonology department... it looks like a trip may be in order, and I've only just arrived.* "Anything else?"

The man scowled, imagining the pains that the murder case would now involve, then looked back at me again and smirked. *I really hate that you simply expect me to do all this... and even worse that I still want to do it despite that.* "You'd best be prepared to go fight some heinous creature in some dank dungeon. Bleedin' demons! When do I get the case where I have to go to some nice tropical island to solve it? I'm too old for this balderdash. And hurry it up, if the king's advisors get wind of the murderer being a demon, they'll try to call in Payne."

Naturally, if the case did involve a tropical island the inspector would be only too happy to do it instead of sending me off. *Payne? Franklin Payne? "Who's Payne?"*

"He is an overrated, over-inflated, self-important big game hunter. The bloke has tracked down and killed just about everything you could think of, and everyone goes running to him at the slightest hint of trouble. I don't need his arrogance mucking about with my investigation. I am capable of getting things handled myself, thank you very much."

I snickered at him, "You handle it? Don't you mean me?" *I'd bet I could share more than a few stories with that Payne fellow. I'd bet he didn't kill the Stillwater Giant, now did he? Regardless of what the late H.T. Parnell claimed.*

The investigator threw up his hands in disgust, scowling at me, "Am I going to have to begin dealing with your preposterous arrogance now? If you want to do the job, great, if not, leave me be."

You need my help and you know it. You're bloody useless. "You never mentioned what the pay was, incidentally."

"Damned money-hungry...! Luckily, I don't need to give you anything for it. The parents of one of the victims turned out to be a very wealthy society couple. They are offering a gold reward for bringing him to justice. Now get out there and take care of this bleeding thing!"

That's right. You not only need me but you know you need me. You could stand to be a bit nicer about it. "Sounds fair. Good day."

I stepped out of the police station, trying to plan exactly when I

would take my trip to Tarant. It wasn't going to be a short trip for certain, and I wanted to take care of another few things locally before leaving, not the least of which would be at least seeing Frederick for a moment. Moreso than worrying about how he would react to my return, I had to start worrying about how he would react to my departure afterwards. A part of me was hoping he would come along... I knew he would enjoy our investigation of the lost Iron Clan. Whatever happened, I certainly couldn't stick around at home for too long when I had assassins on my trail.

Perhaps it would make a nice gift if I brought him a book from his rival's study when I arrived. Yes, I think that would go a long way to smoothing things over. Hello, Frederick, have you ever heard of a gem called T'sen-Ang: Horror Among the Dark Elves? Oh yes you have... I couldn't let him keep it, for his own sake, but the look on his face would be priceless.

Chapter the Forty Ninth:

Confronting the Past

I wandered over to 9 Gray Wolf Terrace and knocked on the door to the Misk residence. I waited around for several minutes before finally determining that I wasn't going to get an answer. I was tempted to simply pick the lock and steal what I wanted, but I decided to be nice about it and give them a chance. I instead wandered off for awhile, intending on taking the dirt path through Old King's Way - the poor area of town where I'd grown up - and up to Maxim's old factory.

It saddened me to see that the disparity between Old King's Way and the rest of the city still remained. It wasn't nearly as stark or as dangerous as the difference between the main areas of Tarant and the Boil, but it still seemed shameful. Despite being the poor area, however, it had its small joys. Taking a brief detour, I wandered off in the direction of the old rabbit farm I used to delight in visiting when I was younger. It was still around, too, rabbits hopping about all excitedly as I approached.

The door to the farmhouse was open so I decided to poke my head in and say hello. I always had been one for indulging my whims, and this was no exception. The older man inside was turned away from me, staring dejectedly at the floor. I recognized him, although he looked considerably different than I remembered. I was sure that his physical age was only a part of it, and the inaccuracy of my memory was the other part. "Hello, there."

He turned around, somewhat startled, giving me a curious look. I was sure he would never recognize me; I could still have been considered a child the last time I saw him. "Oh! Pardon me, madam, you're so quiet I didn't even notice you coming around. My name's David Wit, what can I help you with?"

I smiled pleasantly. *Yes, I know your name, Mr. Wit... I've remembered so many unpleasant things from my past that it would be a shame if I'd forgotten your kindness, or your gentle smile when you watched me playing with the rabbits.* "Well met, David. You look as though you're doing fairly well for yourself here." I'd briefly considered introducing myself, as well, but I was still nervous at the thought of recognition. It was silly.

He turned and shook his head sadly, his brief moment of excitement fading back into the mellow despondence that had taken him before I arrived, looking a lot closer to how he had when I'd first arrived. "Yeah... I've done all right for my daughter and myself. At least... I was..."

Daughter? I don't remember him having a daughter. My, time does change everything... "Was? What happened?" I was nosy, and persistent. Aside from that, I realized I might even be able to help. It seemed I'd been helping a lot of people lately.

"Something very strange has been happening lately. Every night, one of my rabbits is killed and partially devoured. The signs indicate a large beast of some sort, but no one else in the area is being bothered or has seen anything strange. If you're available, I'd really appreciate some help figuring it out."

It was almost shameful. I looked so much like an adventurer that, at my asking, nearly anybody would open up to me in hopes that I could help them. *For the rabbit man, how can I refuse? You were so kind when I was young.* "I'll try. How long has this been going on for?"

He scratched his head with a pained look on his face, clearly upset about the whole situation. "The killings have been happening for nearly a full lunar turn. If things keep up at this rate, I'll be ruined within another 2! Rabbits breed quickly... but not that quickly!"

I tried to ponder the possibilities, looking for any kind of lead, "What about a dog? Do you own a dog? ...or perhaps it's a wolf?" *Hmmm.*

He shook his head, "There aren't any wolves around for miles. I don't own a dog, either... tried that before, too much trouble keeping them from scaring the rabbits... I never had one that ate them though."

"Hmm... puzzling. I'll see if I can find out anything." *What in blazes could it be? Perhaps some young boys playing a nasty prank?* The only way to find out for sure was to sit there and watch. I turned and walked out of the farmhouse crossing the dirt road and poorly concealing myself in some bushes. Sebastian wandered off and pulled out a cigar, idly smoking at the base of the bridge that lead to the rest of the city. Vollinger took the time to clean his gun, always careful to keep it well-maintained. Virgil simply stared off into space as though barely aware the rest of us even existed. *If it's bothering you that much, why can't you just say it...?*

I saw movement all of the sudden out of the corner of my eye. I turned to see a massive, furry beast leaping out of an open window in Mr. Wit's farmhouse. It galloped forward on two legs, snatching up a rabbit in its thick, beastly claws. It brought the rabbit up to its lupine snout and began chewing on it, devouring over half of it in seconds. It sniffed at the air nervously and snarled in my direction before diving back inside. *Good heavens! A werewolf! Even a rumor has to be true sometimes!*

I crept out from my substandard hiding place in the bushes and quietly tiptoed up to the window I'd seen the beast enter through. I looked inside nervously, afraid less of the creature I'd just seen and more of what I expected to find inside. Lying on the bed inside the room was a young girl, with clumps of white, bloodied fur strewn about her haphazardly. She was sleeping fitfully, sweat dripping from her brow.

I walked back inside the farmhouse immediately, at once regretful and resolute, "David... I discovered what's been happening to your rabbits." I sighed heavily.

He looked impatient, "You did? So soon? What? What is it?"

"I'm afraid it's your daughter... I don't quite know how to say this, but she's become a werewolf." *I can't believe I just said that, and furthermore that I believe it's the truth. This is madness.*

He seemed genuinely afraid, as I'm sure he'd heard the rumors, too. "A werewolf! Oh no! Not my baby! It can't be! What are we to do?"

I placed a hand on his shoulder, trying to brace him for what was to come or perhaps to comfort him. *Why does it have to come to this? The rabbit man doesn't deserve this...* My sense of decency wouldn't allow me to say anything else, "It would probably be for the best of all if we killed her."

"No! Don't hurt her! She's all I have left in the world since her mother's death. Please! You're a traveler... perhaps you have heard of a cure?"

I honestly don't want to bring harm to you or your daughter if it can at all be avoided. "No. I have not."

"Please, madam," he begged me furiously, "in your travels, if you happen to find a cure, think of us. I've heard there are astounding cures in the great mage city of Tulla. Perhaps if you look there... But don't hurt her! I'll make sure she's locked up at night! I swear I will! She won't hurt anyone."

I nodded at him, "I won't hurt her. If ever I find a cure, I will return with it." I didn't expect to find myself in Tulla, but I could at least ask the gypsy in Tarant when I went, or pay a visit to a magick shop.

David fell on his knees, "Oh thank you! Thank you! I will take my leave of you now. I must go speak with Cynthia. This will be most distressing to her."

"Goodbye, David." *Well, that was a fine way to taint an innocent childhood memory. I don't think I'll ever forget the sight of that rabbit being brutally torn apart.* I departed David's house and wandered back to the main path, lost in thought. It almost seemed like horror and tragedy followed me wherever I went, though I supposed it could've been just my tendency to notice it moreso than anything else. I found such things difficult to ignore.

Well, if there's one man whose luck cannot get any worse, I'd bet it's old man Maxim. I walked towards Maxim's factory at the top of the hill in the distance. It was impossible to miss as it was by far the largest building in the area. The inside was utterly filled with scrap, and most of it not the useful kind. Otherwise ideal parts were broken in

new and interesting ways, and absolutely nothing was organized. The smell of oil and fuel mixed to make a nauseating aroma, even to one so technologically inclined as myself. It certainly wasn't the factory I remembered, though I hadn't been nearly as interested in technology when I was a child. What child isn't fascinated by magick, before they figure out how bloody boring it is to study properly? "Hello there, Mr. Maxim. Many apologies, but I couldn't help but notice the state of your factory... what happened here?"

"Damned imbecilic ogres stole my flying machine prototypes and burned down my factory. And just to add that little extra joy to the whole affair, they beat me senseless as well. Now the King's advisors say I'm a fraud, that heavier-than-air flight is impossible. They say I staged the whole thing to cover my failure. Without proof, my days here are done."

You'd be interested in knowing one of my reasons for coming about... "I saw your machines fly."

He didn't seem to really believe me. "You saw them fly? Where? Where are my aeroplanes?" His tone was more accusatory than exciting.

His lack of knowledge on the subject made me realize something rather suddenly. Although I'd told my story to the Tarantian when I first arrived in Tarant, the average Caladonian was unlikely to have read it. They'd surely become well aware of the zeppelin tragedy, but the weekly scoop of the Tarantian rarely made it to the shores of Caladon unless it was something truly astounding. 'Miracle Survivor Tells All' sounded more like a hoax than anything. "The ogres crashed them after shooting down the Zephyr."

Maxim's skepticism waned. My story was just outlandish enough to actually be believable. If I were barging into his factory trying to set him off on some balderdash or another I wouldn't be very likely to concoct something so bizarre and easily disbelieved. "Those stupid, inbred, ignorant beasts! They wrecked my masterpieces! And for what, to kill innocent people?! The bastards!"

I could understand his anger, certainly, especially if this was the first he'd heard of what really happened. I was less interested in his ire,

however, and more interested in lending a helping hand to a fellow technologist. "I can say I saw your machines fly. Would that help?" "I am sorry to say I fear your word would not be enough. I need tangible evidence that cannot be refuted."

I know the damned things work. "Why don't you simply build another one?"

The level stare he gave me suggested that I certainly wasn't providing him with anything he hadn't already thought of. "No money. This was all funded by the King. That is why his advisors are after my head, and I can't get any more funds without proof. Quite the vicious circle, it is."

Well... I suppose if I haven't gotten around to fixing up that old camera I'm probably never going to... and if the film is salvagable... I can part with this one small joy, in exchange for the greater joy of helping this old man out. "What type of proof would you need?"

He shrugged hopelessly, "Anything that would prove they were capable of flight."

"Let's say I found proof for you. What would that be worth?" It sounded like such a horrible thing to ask, but I was searching for that last little bit to convince me to give up the camera I'd been carrying for so long.

"I could give you an experimental mechanized arachnid I've been developing. Quite handy to have around in a scuffle; it will heal you automatically!"

Like those spiders back in Ashbury, or in the Place of Lost Voices... but with healing? That's more than enough to convince me, you've got yourself a deal! "Here's a camera with pictures of them flying. Would that do it?"

He grabbed ahold of the camera excitedly, frowning just a little at its damaged, misshapen exterior. He deftly worked over it, replacing a few of the broken parts with others he had lying around and twisting it back into shape. In less than a minute's time he already had the damn thing fully repaired and was extracting the undeveloped film.

"Yes! Vindication! Thank you for this. Not only will I be allowed to carry on my work, I can also make those advisors look ridiculous!" He dug around amidst the parts on the floor and pulled out a folded up machine, handing it to me. "And here's the medical arachnid I promised you. Oh, and you may as well take the plans for it in case you have cause to need them."

I glanced over the plans happily, interested in the details of the machine. It was well beyond my comprehension without the assistance of manuals, however. "Thank you."

Maxim smiled at me, "If you don't mind, I must go to get these developed immediately..." He looked like he was thinking about asking me to leave, then figured his workshop was damn near ruined anyway and simply ran out. *Good luck, Maxim.* While he was away I slipped the plans I'd stolen from Bates onto a shelf. *You enjoy those, now.* I decided I'd wasted enough time and if the Misks weren't home yet then I was just going to have to break into their damn house.

I knocked on the door and waited patiently for several moments, much like before. This time, however, I actually received an answer. A rather annoyed looking butler opened the door and carefully looked me over before turning inside briefly. I heard him mutter, "We have visitors. Would you like for me to let them in?" He turned back a few moments later and opened the door. "Greetings. Welcome to the Misk residence."

I wandered inside, looking about to see how the place had changed since I'd last visited. Victor and Frederick weren't exactly close friends, but we still had visited here occasionally. It looked somehow more sparse than I remembered, but I'd been spending the last few years of my life living in expensive inn rooms and visiting all of the wonders the world had to offer. Naturally my opinion of what made a room 'nice' would've changed accordingly. With so little cluttering up the room, however, it would've been hard not to notice the Book of Durin's Truth sitting in the glass display case near the entrance. The lady of the house approached me and introduced herself. The youngish woman before me is dressed in a dark blue gown with a small hat and veil. She is strikingly beautiful, her hair a deep shade of amber, her eyes ice-blue but a little swollen and red... me surmise

she's been crying.

"I'm Lilies Misk, wife of the late Victor Misk."

"The LATE Mr. Misk? He's dead?" *No... no way! Victor is DEAD?!*

She nodded, dabbing her cheeks with a handkerchief. "Yes... he just recently passed. We put him in the ground not four days ago."

I was at a complete loss for words. My conversational instincts took over and I filled the silence with social niceties while I tried to think of what to say. "I'm very sorry for your loss, madam." It seemed like the best course of action was to change the subject of conversation until I could more fully wrap my mind around the idea that Victor was dead. "Er... on a more pleasant topic, I was wondering if I could ask you about that book in the display case...?"

"Oh, that's called 'The Book of Durin's Truth,' an ancient dwarven tome, I believe. It was one of Victor's most prized possessions..." She sobs a little, dabs at the corner of her eye with a handkerchief.

I suppose, so shortly after his death, it's no surprise everything reminds her of him. Still, I do need that book. "I'm in need of that book. Is there any way I might procure it?" I felt rude asking, but I was still a bit off from news of Victor's death and truly the ancient secret of the dwarves was a bit more important than a sentimental memento of a rich woman's late husband. *I really am horrible.*

She seemed taken aback, which I couldn't really blame her for. "Why on earth would you need to have that very book?"

I somehow doubt you're going to believe this. "Well, I was tasked by a dwarf of the Wheel Clan - the clan among clans - to research the ancient and mysterious Iron Clan. I managed to procure a map to a remote location in the Stonewall Mountains where I found an ancient machine that told me to seek the Book of Durin's Truth. I do believe I'm on to something."

Her eyes dried slightly and she gave me a rather direct look. "Hmmm. An interesting quest, my friend. Perhaps I might be interested in selling it after all. Are you interested in buying it?"

"Buy? Madam! This is a cultural heirloom! Have you no shame?" *I see*

exactly how deep your sentimentality runs. I should've known.

She gives me a shrewd stare.

"Business is business, my friend. And don't think about obtaining the book by other means... that display case has a most unpleasant lock mechanism. So, will you take the book or not? That's the price for you now; take it or leave it."

Thanks for the warning, I'll make sure not to waste a good pick trying to open it. "Forget about it. I'd rather talk to you about Victor. He's actually the man I came here to see. What happened to him?"

Fake tears welled up in her eyes again. It made me sick. *Go ahead, put back on your phony show of grief.* "He drowned... they found him down by the docks, washed up onto the shore. We hadn't seen him for days, but he had been... that way... for the past few months."

I raised an eyebrow, not quite catching her meaning, "What do you mean 'that way'?"

I could hear the anger in her voice and I could tell it was much more genuine than the tears she pretended to shed. "Victor became... unbalanced... in the last few months of his life. He began having delusions, frequent anxiety attacks... ever since they released that cursed book..."

I should've guessed... "You mean The Curse of T'sen-Ang by Kendrick Wales?"

"Once the book was released here in Caladon, he became convinced he was going to be the next victim of that so-called curse... I tried to comfort him, to tell him it was all an author's conjecture, but he just wouldn't listen. He would say: "They got my old dad, and now they're coming for me.""

I had no doubts that the Dark Elves were still at it, protecting their home as they had for over 500 years. I began to dig for any information I could, starting to grow somewhat nervous about what they had in store for me. Surely they knew I was trying to track them down. "Where was the funeral?"

She pointed off to her right, "At the Caladon cemetery. It's northwest of here, near the Panarii Temple."

Right... the First Temple. "Was there anyone strange at the funeral?" I was starting to sound as paranoid as Tyron, only I felt my paranoia was somewhat better justified.

She shrugged, "Not that I remember. There were a few of our friends, the servants, and some family." *Frederick... I bet you were there, too, weren't you?* "Could you tell me about the delusions Victor was having, madam?"

"He would say that people were following him... that hooded and robed figures would appear all around him, staring at him, watching him. He said they would approach him, demanding the book and threatening horrible things if he wouldn't give it to them. Almost exactly what had been described as happening to previous owners of the book..."

It was clear to me that she didn't believe him, especially considering how she referred to them as 'delusions'. She always was daft. "And you never saw any of this?"

Her voice became whiny again and she brought back out her handkerchief. *Give it a rest, woman.* "No... I believe all of those stories drove my poor Victor mad. Of course, there were an ungodly number of collectors who came calling when they found out he still had a copy of the book... but all of them were polite and professional. Not an evil man among them...."

I'm sure you're not nearly the excellent judge of character you seem to think yourself to be. The less evil a man seems the more it'll hurt when he stabs you in the back. "You mentioned Victor said something about his father. What happened to him?"

"Victor's father, Philip Misk, was an avid collector of books... at one time he had the largest collection in all of Caladon. He died in a fire. It was deduced that he had fallen asleep in his study while smoking a cigar... something had caught fire and he was killed in the blaze. Most of his collection was lost in the fire."

"But not 'Horror Among the Dark Elves'...." *Don't you find that strange?*

She seemed to try and explain away my suspicion as though the truth was too fantastical to be real. "No... but Victor didn't find it for many years... it had been hidden in an old chest in the attic of our summer

home. It seems Victor's paranoia may have been an inherited trait."

I'd just seen a werewolf not an hour prior, battled a legendary giant earlier in my travels, and made a habit of being blessed by ancient gods. I was willing to believe anything. "Doesn't it seem strange that both died somewhat mysteriously?"

She glared at me hatefully for just an instant before fake tears sprouted once again. "I don't share that view, madam. I'm not a superstitious woman. I miss my Victor more than anything, but I put no stock in such tripe. Both Victor and his father were victims of chance and circumstance. I'll hear no more talk of it."

Fine, hide behind your false grief. You're lucky I'm in a good mood today. "Very well. How did the information get out that Victor still owned a copy of the book?"

Anger in her eyes.

"I don't know! We had kept it a secret for so very long... only Victor and I knew, as well as some of our servants... but none of them would ever have said anything... they're like family to us. And we've always treated them so well."

I wanted to laugh at what the woman considered treating her servants well. "Perhaps Mr. Wales paid one of them a hefty sum for the information...?" I was sure they could've used the money, at least.

She sighed dejectedly, "Yes, yes, I know. And we did ask all of them, but all of them denied any complicity in the matter. I trust them all... and besides, I've no proof to the contrary. I suppose I'd be grateful if someone were to look into the matter."

Of course they'd deny it if you asked. You really don't have a clue, do you? "I'd be honored to offer my services."

She shrugged, "Any help would be appreciated. The servants are around the house... feel free to speak with them."

Not like that'll do any good. "I just might do that, but first I have one last question... do you still have a copy of the book?"

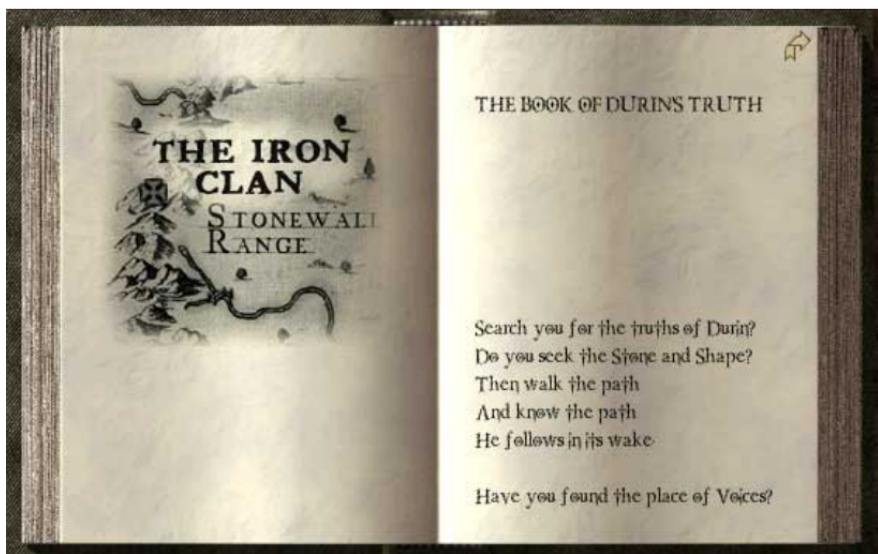
She shook her head. "No... up until the last two weeks, Victor carried

it on his person all the time. Then one day he came home and told us he had hidden it 'somewhere that only he and his old Dad would know'. We all thought it very strange, but, by then, there wasn't much about Victor that wasn't."

"I see. Thank you for your time madam." She nodded, turning away from me and walking off into the bedroom, leaving her butler to let me out. I made my move quickly.

Thanks for the book. I knew we could work something out. As I turned away from Mrs. Misk I noticed something on the ground sitting next to the sofa. It was a passport for one Wesley Carrington who lived at 25 Dragon's Turnabout. *Hmm, interesting. Now that might be worth taking a look into.* Thinking I'd already left, Mrs. Misk called her butler into her room to ask him for something. I quickly unlocked the display case, leaving her key inside of it so she wouldn't suspect I broke in, and I snatched the book out from it. I darted out the door before I was seen, making my way towards the address on the passport.

I glanced at the book while I walked.



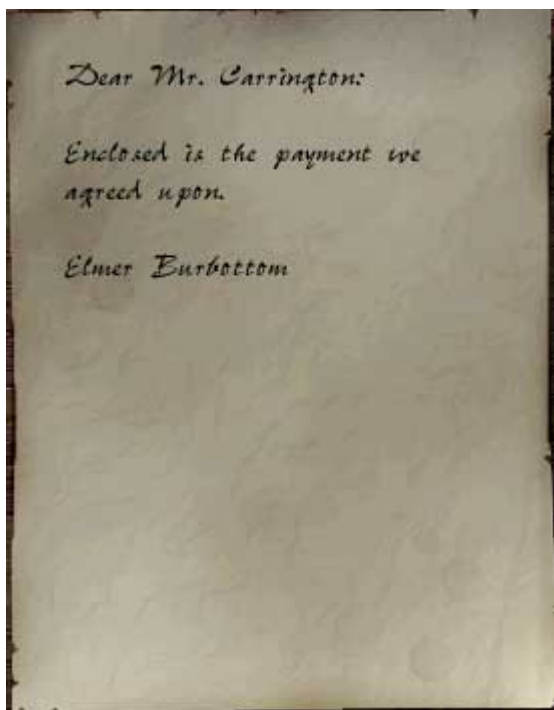
*Have you heard the message clear?
I think you have
I know you have
For else you'd not be here*

*The road from here is not much longer
You've traveled far to see this light*

*Your heart keep strong
Your courage long
The morning will be bright*

*Now travel to the Vault of Iron
And bring with you the key of glass
The door swings wide
And there inside
You find your truth at last*

It was certainly a curious little book, but at least I had an idea of where to go next. The 'key of glass' line confused me, since I'd made the key out of mithril, and I no longer had it anyway. I supposed I could always make another if I really needed it. By the time I'd finished reading and mulling over the contents of the book I was at Mr. Carrington's house. I picked open the lock and looked around for clues, but I didn't have to look hard. The first thing I spotted was a slip of paper just sitting out on the man's desk.



Dear Mr. Carrington:

*Enclosed is the payment we
agreed upon.*

Elmer Burbottom

I knew it. Now I've really got some questions for the servants at that place. I'll get to the bottom of Victor's murder. I scurried back to the Misk residence and knocked on the door again. The butler answered and, seeing who I was, let me in. "Shall I fetch the missus?"

"No, that won't be necessary. Actually, I returned to speak with you. Could I ask your name, good sir?"

He seemed confused, but he tried to be accommodating, "Of course, madam. I am Wesley Carrington, the butler here at the Misk household."

Not for long you're not. "Can you tell me anything about the book by Mr. Wales?"

His eyes widen slightly.

"You mean the curse of T'sen-Ang? That I am surprised you'd have the audacity to mention the name of it in this house, madam. Especially knowing what it did to Mr. Misk..."

His guilt was as plain as day, and I was honestly surprised that the lady of the house couldn't tell when she asked him outright. If she'd known her servants as well as she should have, perhaps treated them as decently as she claimed, she'd have been able to spot his guilt without even asking. Victor would still be alive, too. "Forgive me, but I'm looking into the matter for Mrs. Misk."

He narrowed his eyes at me hatefully. The tone of his voice shifted from surprised to outright hostile. "Are you insinuating that I might have something to do with that, madam...?"

I smirked and stared at him purposefully, "What can you tell me about Elmer Burbottom, Wesley?"

A sudden look of shock crossed his face and I heard him audibly gasp. "Wh-what? How do you...?" He suddenly realized his mistake and his face hardened considerably. He was furious. "Have you been going through my personal belongings, madam? Will I be forced to call on the authorities?"

I would hate to abuse the fact, but I know how the police work around here and I know they'd sooner believe the Whytechurch inspector than

they would a rich woman's butler. "Just answer the question, Wesley. Who is he?"

"Listen, madam. If I ever find out you've been going through my things again, I will call the Royal Guard and have you run through on the spot. Now I've nothing left to say to you. Please leave. NOW."

Who do you expect you're fooling with that rubbish? Oh yes, they're real big on capital punishment without a trial here in Caladon. I rolled my eyes. "I'm sure we'll be seeing one another again, Wesley. Good day to you."

I walked outside, trying to think of what to do next. I thought of visiting Frederick and asking him his opinion of the whole thing, but I couldn't very well just waltz into his house after what I'd done and start asking him random questions. It was funny, I did that to so many people, yet when it was somebody I knew I felt so much more uneasy about it.

I walked over to the nearby cemetery that Mrs. Misk had pointed out, just idly looking around to see if there might be any hints on Victor's grave or if there were any suspicious elves lurking about.

"Excuse me... I'll just be in a moment..."

Virgil...? What's gotten into you? He hadn't been quite right since we arrived in Caladon and I strongly suspected that something in the graveyard had to do with why. Come to think of it, I likely hadn't been quite right either... and for the same reasons. "Vollinger, Sebastian... could you wait here for me as well? I'd like to be alone for a bit. Watch Terry for me." Terry gave a dissatisfied woof.

Sebastian winked, "I'll take care of the little hellraiser for you, you go on and pay your respects."

"Thank you... both of you." I wandered off into the graveyard, avoiding Virgil so as not to intrude on his space. I went straight to the back of the graveyard, looking for a grave I ought to have been ashamed for not visiting sooner. In the three years since Nathaniel's death I'd only visited his grave once, just after the funeral. I cried and cried, and Frederick even tried to comfort me, but it wasn't his place to do so. I was mad at him for that, I suddenly remembered. Even

moreso, I was mad at myself... I was still mad at myself.

My heart caught in my chest when I spied an all-too-familiar name on the grave right next to Nathaniel's. I was so in shock that my entire body stopped moving and I felt like I was going to pass out.

*Here lies Frederick Colburn
Beloved Husband and Father
1849-1885*

I was so stunned I didn't even cry. I didn't know how to feel. At first I'd been running away from him, and by the time I had a change of heart and started longing for his company again he was already dead. I'd spent the past year or more waiting for the moment when I would arrive home and tell him of all the adventures I had. In my mind he'd welcome me back with open arms, forgiving me for robbing him again. Those dreams would never come to pass, could never come to pass... the realization was finally starting to hit me that my beloved Frederick was dead.

No... how could this have happened...? All this time, I've been longing to return home... I've brought you so many gifts, Frederick, I have so many stories to share.... I wanted to see the look on your face when I showed you the journals of Kraka-tur and Kerghan the Terrible... I wanted to feel your pulse quicken as I related tales of Qintarra and the Bedokaan, or of Maximillian on the Isle of Despair... I wanted to invite you along with me to search for the lost remnants of the Iron Clan, to uncover ancient Dwarven history hand-in-hand.... By the Gods, Frederick, is this how you felt when I left you...? So alone, so... empty...? Frederick, I am so sorry... Dozens of emotions assaulted me at once, from guilt and regret to sadness and horror.

I heard quiet footsteps behind me and I turned, startled, to see the dwarven gravekeeper standing nearby. "I haven't seen anybody visiting old Fred in quite awhile. Did you know him?"

I slowly nodded, sniffing before I spoke, wiping off the tears cascading from my eyes, "Y-yes." It took all the strength I had to eke out that single word between sobs.

"I knew him. He was a good man, always very kind to me even though I'm just a gravekeeper." The dwarf shook his head sadly, letting out a deep sigh, "He didn't deserve the things that happened to him. It's a real shame, the story behind that one."

"I... I'm not familiar," I managed to stammer out. "How did it happen?" *Tell me what happened to my Frederick...*

"I suppose these old legs of mine could use a rest anyhow," he gave me a rather friendly look and sat down on the ground, curling his stubby legs underneath his body. "Well, by the end old Fred sure didn't have a whole lot to be happy about. His son died far too young, he was only a lad of thirteen... it was such a tragic accident.... I remember well how often I found Fred in this here graveyard, just sobbing." *Oh, Frederick... we both loved Nathaniel... so much... if only I'd been more careful, none of this would ever have happened...*

As if reading my mind, the dwarf continued, "Then Fred's wife... he lost his wife that very same week. She didn't take her son's death very well, either. The way Fred told it, she blamed herself for the whole thing. She ran off... bought a ticket to the I.F.S. Zephyr when Fred was at work one day. When we heard news of the accident, we were all devastated." *So that's it... they never read my story in the Tarantian... everybody thinks I'm dead.... Of course, it all makes sense now, why nobody recognizes me... I'm just an adventurer from Tarant, bearing a passing resemblance to an unlikely woman who died three years ago.... Gods, Frederick... you thought...*

"She was a good woman... had a lot of energy... didn't get along so well with a lot of people, but Fred loved her all the same. Even after her death, he just couldn't let go. He was a complete wreck for a good six months after that, and every day his grip on reality grew weaker and weaker. One day his mind just... snapped. He started knockin' on people's doors at night, askin' if they'd seen his Samantha like he'd forgot she was dead, but knew she was missin'. He looked horrible.... Ah, forgive me... I'm not talking your ear off, am I?"

I shook my head, still scarcely able to believe the truth of the matter. "Not at all, sir, I'm... I'm saddened to hear your tale, but I wish to

hear it all the same..." *It was me...? Oh, Frederick... you thought I was dead...! First Nathaniel, and then me... by the Gods, what have I done?!*

"Well," he sighed heavily, the tiniest trickle of emotion escaping his stony facade, "you already know how it ends. One day they found his body in the gutter... beat to death sometime during the night. The investigation didn't take long... turned out to be a coupla rich kids, had a bit too much to drink and thought they'd have fun at poor old Fred's expense... didn't know when to stop. The guard let 'em loose after a night in jail, said they'd been drunk and probably did old Fred a favor in the end anyway. We all know the kids' parents bribed the right people to make it happen." I clenched my teeth and nearly choked on my tears. Rage and sorrow battled in my heart... I wanted to scream. *It never bloody changes, does it? Kick a man when he's down instead of lending a helping hand... the rich trampling all over the rest of us, no matter how hard we work or how much hell we've been put through! Frederick... no, not like that... you deserved so much better than that...*

"I buried him myself, right next to his son. In the end, that was all I could do for him. It's one of the sadder stories in this here graveyard, and this place don't have any happy endings if you know what I mean. Anyway... I gotta get back to work, I'll leave you to pay your respects. It's been a while since I thought back to old Fred here, and I thank you for listening to this old dwarf's story. You take care, miss." I sat there, tears pouring down my face accompanied by horrible sobs. *Not you, too, Frederick... I've gone and killed you, too...*

I sat there and cried for so long that I lost all track of time. I simply couldn't believe the truth of the matter, and the harder I tried to make myself accept it the more pain I felt. The urge to run away again welled up inside of me, but I had nothing left to run away from. I couldn't very well outrun the truth.

At last, when the sun began to set and colored the entire graveyard in an intense shade of deep crimson, I started to realize how much time had really passed. I wasn't even sure when I'd entered the graveyard, but I didn't think it had been that close to sunset. *There are people waiting for me... people I call friends... Virgil... Virgil had lost somebody, too... that was the entire reason I'd thought to visit*

Nathaniel's grave in the first place. *If anybody can share this pain with me, it's Virgil... I can't bear this alone...*

I slowly climbed to my feet, staring at Frederick's grave and trying desperately to dry my eyes. "I know it's far too late for words, but... just... I'm so sorry, Frederick. I can't stay with you right now, but I promise I'll come back... I'll make it up to you one day. I don't even know how to bloody start, but I will find a way. Say hello to Nathaniel for me... I miss you both terribly. Good-" I cut off, having difficulties finishing my thought. "Good-" Tears started to flow once more. *I'm not ready to say goodbye yet, Frederick... and I don't know if I ever will be.* I took a deep breath, feeling the tears burning behind my eyes. Slowly, one step at a time, I forced myself to walk away from Frederick's grave. I saw Virgil in the distance, staring at a single grave at the end of a row. I was desperate for company, for somebody else who might understand what it felt like to lose somebody so dear. "Oh... I'm sorry... I, uh... had something to do here. I'm ready to go when you are..."

You don't have to run off on your own... we don't have to be alone, Virgil... please don't make me be alone... "Virgil... what are you doing here? Who's grave is this?" I walked closer to him and placed my hand on his shoulder. I felt that our shared experiences could only bring us closer, and I would've done anything to rid myself of the horrible feeling of isolation that consumed me.

He hung his head down sadly, looking like he was about to say something. "Nothing... I... This is... someone I used to know. Many years ago... I... just thought I should stop by to pay my respects." Whatever he had intended on saying never came out.

Not now, Virgil... please, don't push me away... I can't bear to be alone right now, please talk to me... I read the name off the grave, *Lawrence Brummond 1860-1884*. "Lawrence Brummond...? Was he a friend of yours?" I wasn't even thinking, just blindly pushing forward... forcing my presence on Virgil when he least seemed to want it. My pain pushed me towards the only person I had left that I felt could truly understand me. My need became his need, and I refused to accept that he just didn't want to talk about his past... that unburdening himself would not bring him the same relief it might've brought me.

Virgil started stammering nervously, not having expected me to question him further. I grabbed ahold of his hand and I held it close to me, trying to reassure him, trying anything I could to remove the distance between us. "Lawrence was my... uh... my friend. We grew up together. In Tarant, actually. Our, uh, families... moved to Caladon when we were older. He died in an... accident." I could tell that Virgil wasn't being honest with me, and that my actions were making it that much harder for him to keep lying. "A terrible accident..."

The closer he came to sharing, the harder I pushed him for information. I wanted so badly to hear what he had to say, to understand him and in turn be understood. I pulled off his metal gauntlet and clutched his hand between both of mine. I stared up into his eyes and asked, "What happened?" I felt the warmth in his hand, yet more tears forming behind my eyes in sympathetic anticipation for the untold story that hung heavily in the air. "I don't want to talk about it. Please... let's just be on our way."

No...! Why do you continue to push me away?! Why now, when I need you the most? It would've hurt me less if he'd simply struck me across the face. I dropped his hand and tossed his gauntlet back at him, turning away quickly before he could see the tears in my eyes. "Fine. Let's go... the others are waiting."

The tone in his voice changed. He became much more soft-spoken and less sure of himself. "I'm sorry... I... well, forget it..."

I turned around, tears be damned, and I looked up at him. "Why don't you just tell me, Virgil?!"

He looked at me and I could tell he wanted to, but for some reason he still would not. He shook his head slowly and regretfully, "Perhaps another time..."

I turned around again and walked towards the others, not bothering to look back at Virgil. I could hear him following me, but a part of me wanted to run and just keep running until he was no longer there. I felt alienated by the one person I thought I could trust.

Chapter the Fiftieth: Tragedy Abounds In Our Cruel World

I wiped the tears from my eyes as I ran back towards the others, trying to conceal the anguish inside of me. It was fully nighttime when I rejoined Vollinger, Sebastian, and Terry. Sebastian was holding Terry back aggressively and it looked like Terry was about to start biting. When that dog started biting, he didn't joke around, and I really didn't want Sebastian getting maimed. "It's all right, Sebastian. Let Terry go. Terry! What's gotten into you?!" The strange events I'd returned to were doing a good job of taking my mind off of Frederick's death, and Virgil's distance. A distraction was truly the best thing I could hope for.

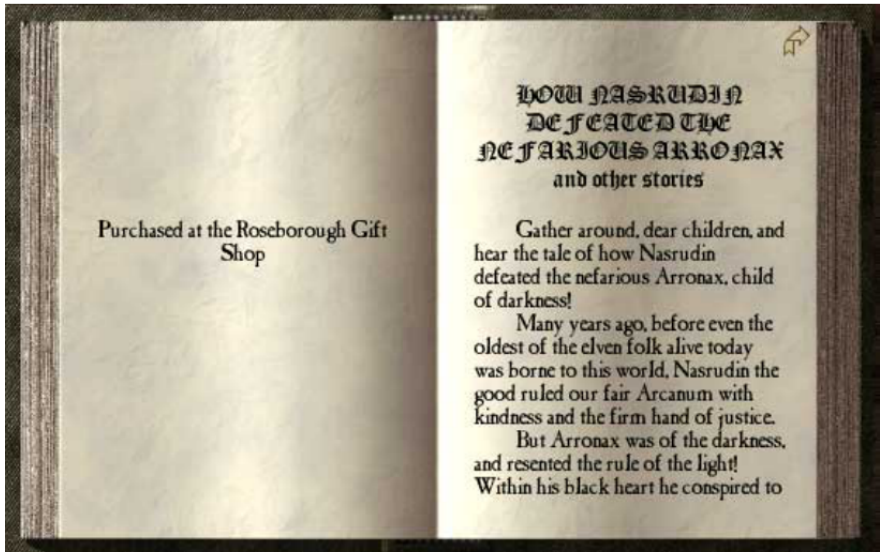
Sebastian shrugged, "I don't know what his problem is! He keeps on running over to that Misk fella's grave and digging at it. He's going to get the whole lot of us in a world of trouble!"

I grabbed a nearby shovel that was leaning up against the cemetery wall. "How about if I get us in trouble, then?" His eyes went wide with shock and if I'd been in a better mood it would've made me laugh. "It's dark anyway, nobody will see us. Aren't you curious what Terry wants?" I surely wasn't acting quite like myself, but at that moment I lacked all manner of self control. If digging up Victor Misk's grave would keep my mind off of Frederick for just a few minutes longer, then I was going to do it. Curiosity and a lack of self control are a dangerous mix.

I ran over to Terry and gently pushed him out of the way of the grave. He moved aside slowly and gave a dissatisfied woof. Digging out the grave was an easy task, considering how fresh it was. It was a moment of emotional and moral weakness, but ripping out shovels full of dirt and tossing them aside haphazardly seemed somehow therapeutic. I put everything I had into digging, losing myself in

working the shovel against the dirt. At last my shovel struck Victor's ornately decorated casket and I stood up, morbidly proud of myself.

Terry let out another bark and began scratching at the lid of the casket. "All right, Terry, if that's how you're going to be." Terry whined and moved out of the way as I brought my shovel down onto casket, puncturing a nicely sized hole into the lid and sending splinters of wood flying. Sitting out in the open on Victor's chest was a book. I stared at it for several moments, unsure of exactly how to proceed. *How the hell did that get there? Terry couldn't possibly have known, could he?* I bent down and picked it up, noting the obviously fake binding.



wrest control away from the virtuous Nasrudin and his holy Elven Council. Nasrudin, in his goodness, and not knowing of Arronax's evilness, had bestowed a seat on the Elven Council to Arronax and, to repay his kindness, Arronax destroyed an entire city!

Nasrudin's heart was crushed. He condemned Arronax to the Void! But Arronax had twisted several of the council to his nefarious ways. And

there was War!

This was a bitter war, my children, and if not for Nasrudin, Arronax would have destroyed us all! But, as it always does, goodness won the day, though a sad day it was, as the great Nasrudin lost his own life as he banished Arronax to the dark, eternal Void!

So, without the blessed Nasrudin guiding our way, we would all be enslaved by Evil! Remember this as you go to sleep, and know that Nasrudin watches over us all - but beware! Arronax may still be lying in wait for those who do not mind their elders and keep to their studies!

The book seemed like utter trash, but the place where Victor had purchased it - Roseborough - seemed important. I dug Stennar's old matchbook out of my pocket, noting that it, too, came from Roseborough. It seemed like that would be a good place to continue my search, both for the Dark Elves and for the Black Mountain Clan. Given the late hour, however, and the fact that I'd just desecrated a grave to get the information, I felt it wouldn't quite be the best of times to ask Mrs. Misk what she knew about the place. After what I'd just done, I figured it best to avoid contacting Mrs. Misk at all until I had more information with which to incriminate her butler. That was a much less suspicious reason for a visit than asking about Roseborough would be.

Tarant would probably be the best place to dig up information on Elmer Burbottom, but if I was going to pay for passage on a ship I certainly wanted to continue my investigation for Arthur Tyron as well. There was a ship still in the harbor so I approached the captain who was sitting out on the deck getting some fresh, night air. "Pardon the intrusion at such a late hour, but I was wondering if you would take my companions and I to this island marked on my map here. It's urgent." I pointed him to the island not too far from the coast.

He glanced at it and shrugged, "Sure. It'll be 500 coins." Wordlessly I dumped the coins out into his lap. I spent the rest of the night locked up in a private cabin below the deck of the ship, getting what little sleep I could despite the horrible amount of tears that seemed to never stop flowing. I couldn't keep my grief bottled up forever, I could only hope that the next day's events would serve as a powerful

enough distraction to keep me from making a fool of myself in front of my friends. They wouldn't understand what I was going through... how could they? I was a fool to have forced my presence on Virgil so rudely.... By dawn, we had arrived on the island.

The island was rather obviously deserted. The only building on it was a run down old warehouse, not far from where the ship had landed. I poked around outside of it for a bit, but the windows were too high off of the ground and too dirty for me to see through. It looked like I'd have to venture inside to find out any real information. The door didn't even have a proper lock on it, not that it really needed one on such an isolated island. I pushed it open and walked inside.

I felt nauseous at what I saw. There were operating tables spaced evenly throughout the room, each of them bearing thick, rusted straps for detaining their victims. I counted at least a dozen in all. Lying on tables next to them on filthy platters were rusty scalpels, needles, and other implements that I didn't care to think of the uses for. There were cracked bottles long drained of whatever fluids they once contained, and rusted cabinets that had been long emptied of whatever foul medicines were used in such a horrible place. Worst of all there were dark gray, oversized bones cluttering the floor near many of the tables.

There was a single desk sitting in the corner of the room, the wood that it was made of having long begun to rot. I opened one of the drawers, but it broke even as I pulled on it and a small book landed on the ground. It was dusty and worn, and the pages brittle. The cover was barely solid and the book itself was difficult to read. Of all of it there were only two and a half pages towards the middle of the book that had escaped complete ruination.

Experiment 1004A Section 5

The male human, female half ogre coupling producing offspring seems to be an extremely rare occurrence and can not be depended on for significant numbers. The female human, male half ogre experiments fare much better, but with one hundred percent loss of host.

Experiment 1008.5CE Section 2

Our rate of experimentation has increased, with the new influx of the female subjects from the lower part of society. These new hosts can not even be relied upon to go to term, being in such poor health, suffering from common ailments those living in this manner are subject to. A healthier

source of subject would help immensely, as I have some new surgical ideas I would like to implement, but the subjects I have to work with would not hold up under the knife.

Experiment 1015E Section 1

The new surgical techniques we are applying have reduced the numbers of fatalities by removing the unborn before term. The hosts seem to be viable for three "harvests" before their bodies fail.

Subnote 1

Some of my less dedicated colleagues have had to be "dismissed", as they were expressing doubts about

our new female host. I have no such compunctions. Once they are here, they are a number to me and nothing more. Scientific advancement would never occur if the weak willed were to have their say.

I looked up at my companions with wide eyes. Virgil was standing off in a corner, lost in thought. Vollinger had a rather disgusted look on his face and he had his nose covered over with his small, white

handkerchief. Sebastian was staring at one of the tables in horror, and Terry was sniffing at the various piles of bones trying to determine if any of them were safe to gnaw on. "We've got to go back." I announced. "I have to tell Tyron right away."

Vollinger nodded, "I agree, this... place... is most distressing indeed."

Sebastian didn't even say a thing, he just nodded and walked out the door. Virgil followed behind him, also wordlessly. *How long are you going to stay silent? How long will you continue to ignore the pain I feel?* We all got back onto the ship I'd hired and I informed the captain we were headed back to Caladon. Since he was heading in that direction anyway and our stay had been so short he decided to waive his normal fee.

I locked myself in a private cabin once more, praying that our voyage would take even shorter this time, even though it hadn't been a long one in the first place. We arrived back in Caladon before nightfall, and I headed straight back to Dragon's Turnabout. I barged into Tyron's home, but the man standing there wasn't Tyron. It wasn't even a man at all, it was an unfamiliar gnome dressed in a high-class suit. "Who are you? Where is Tyron?!" The excitement in my voice was unfortunately apparent.

"I do not know. I was meant to meet him here; we were to exchange information."

I gritted my teeth, scowling at him, "I don't believe you. What have you done with him?!" *First the journal, and now this... dammit, Tyron was on to something after all... I was too slow!* Rage welled up inside of me. Rage on behalf of the kidnapped and tortured women used for the sick experiments on that island, and rage against the wealthy that used their power and influence to inflict that abuse. *Dammit, Frederick... not like that... you deserved better...*

The gnome shrugged, looking almost amused at my anger. "I could be asking you the same thing, barging into his house, uninvited. I have been a colleague of his for quite some time and he never mentioned you... but I do know who you are and what you have recently acquired. Something that could be... damning to certain parties, yes?"

You smug bastard. Fine, I'll play your little game... for now... and if I

don't like how it turns out I'm in no bloody mood to have any sympathy for you. "Perhaps." I glared at him with pure hatred in my eyes.

He rubbed his chin thoughtfully, and I found it impossible to read exactly what was going on in his mind. Whoever he was, he was damn good at lying. "Ah... I see you are wary. That is smart, as the trail we are following is a dangerous one." He stopped momentarily, choosing his words with extreme caution. I didn't like it one bit. "Very well, I will share with you the information I have gathered, and you can decide for yourself whether to believe me or not. I'm not certain how much of it I believe myself, but this is what I've found out."

About fifty, fifty five years ago, a group of gnomes from various parts of Arcanum began to acquire large amounts of money from investments in new technology. As their wealth and perceived influence began to grow, age old prejudices began to surface. Gnomes were thought to be miserly thieves. The other races did not trust them to gain power.

There were thefts, beatings, and threats. Mysterious letters in the night, warning the "little gnomes" to keep to their place. The gnomes tried human bodyguards, to no avail. Any human that would be a bodyguard to a gnome at that time was, by definition, an untrustworthy, shiftless sort. At first they tried, unsuccessfully, to breed elves and orcs into some bestial magic hybrid to do their bidding... that lead to The Siamese twins.

But you know all about what happened with them, now, don't you? It was a foolhardy idea to begin with, at any rate. Orcs have a natural dislike for gnomes, and the gnomes needed something much more docile. The next obvious choice seemed to be the half ogres. Tired of being hunted, and the promise of large amounts of food gained the gnomes extremely loyal bodyguards. But there was a problem. A half ogre was a very rare thing in those days, and with good scientific reasons for being so. And the gnomes without bodyguards were used as leverage against those protected.

The greatest concentration of these gnomes were in Tarant, which was still a monarchy at the time. They pleaded with the king for his help, but the last thing the king wanted was a group of rich banker gnomes with power in his kingdom. The beatings continued, and the king and his court turned a blind eye to their plight. That was when, well, let's call him Mr. X,

decided to act.

He hired a prostitute to go home with him one evening, and he locked her in his basement, where he also happened to be keeping a full blooded ogre. You can imagine what happened then. She died giving birth, as was to be expected, but Mr. X now had his future bodyguard. He recruited some other gnomes, and the kidnappings began in earnest.

For safety's sake, they set up a "breeding laboratory" on the island you visited. Their plan wasn't working out as well as they had hoped, as the women all died giving birth. And the more prostitutes that disappeared, the more the authorities were looking into their affairs. They decided to try surgical means of delivery, but the women were too sickly to survive that.

That is when the king's hirelings discovered what was happening. Unfortunately for the king, though, the gnomes had become incredibly rich in this time, rich enough, in fact, to purchase the king's murder, and the kidnapping of the queen and her young son. Rumors began circulating immediately, pointing to the queen as the killer of her husband.

The queen was sent to the island. She was the patient in the first successful operation. She mothered three before she passed, I believe. Soon after the Industrial Council gained power in Tarant, the disappearance of prostitutes began to slow down, but a mysterious rash of disappearances of the wives and daughters of the political enemies of the council began.

"They only lasted for a short time, however, as they had now bred enough half-ogre females to no longer need to rely on human breeders. They have hundreds of them now, kept in cages on a breeding farm somewhere. They keep this whole thing in a cloud of mystery by releasing half-truths, lies, and even real information through unstable individuals like Tyron."

I suddenly realized that I was very likely speaking with Tyron's so-called 'ally' on the council, whom had been manipulating Tyron all along. He was, perhaps, 'Mr. X' himself. "So no one believes any of it..." I was utterly stunned. The dozens, perhaps hundreds of women that had been sacrificed... prostitutes, just trying to find a way to live, trying to find any way out of the horrible trap their lives had become. Taken away one night, fearful... abused, chained down and forced to endure a foul rape at the hands of a full ogre. Remaining chained,

kept alive against their will for months on end before finally being granted the sweet respite of death. I felt an overwhelming amount of sadness and pity, even though I had been fighting so desperately hard to keep those emotions at bay after my own personal confrontation with them. Above it all remained that persistent rage, building up ever greater inside of me.

The gnome nodded at me smugly, "Exactly. Everyone believes it to be the imaginings of madmen and paranoids."

Willoughsby... all of you bastards on the council... you did this... I knew you were hiding something, but... something like this?! "Is this all true?"

He shrugged, "That's a good question. We must not be too anxious to believe it because we want it to be true, or too anxious to disbelieve it because we want it to be false. We must remain neutral in our decision as to whether it is true or not."

I growled at him angrily, barely able to contain my rage any longer, "That's absurd! It is either true or it isn't!"

"Hmmm," he mocked me, "Then none of it is true. Well, maybe some of it." The tone in his voice was smug and insulting, he was enjoying manipulating my thoughts and emotions callously, and his attitude only enraged me further still.

"I'll bring proof to the press!" I was so angry that I couldn't stop shouting and my hand instinctively reached for the oaken handle on my axe. "I'll expose this whole thing!"

"What do you have? Nothing! You have a journal that was left for you to find on purpose, which could have been written last week. What have you seen? Why, I believe you saw an abandoned warehouse, nothing more, save what your twisted imagination made it out to be."

I know damn well what I saw, and you'll not convince me it was anything else. I know books, and this journal was NOT written last week! "Why are you doing this?" Why do you continue to taunt me? Why must you push me after I've lost so much... WHY, GIVE ME ONE GOOD REASON WHY I SHOULD NOT KILL YOU WHERE YOU STAND!

He grinned widely, a low chuckle beginning to form in his belly. "We always need more 'converts' to spread the word. You might have had real information, but now you don't know anything. What have I told you that is real? Feel free to tell anyone everything I have told you. I am sure the press would love to hear your story. Perhaps. Good day to you, madam, it has been a pleasure."

That reason is NOT GOOD ENOUGH! "MY PLEASURE HAS NOT YET BEGUN!" I pulled my axe loose from my belt and took a step towards him. He started to sweat and the expression on his face matched that of Tyron's when I'd first met him.

He tried to run, but I was much faster than he'd anticipated. He panicked, turning and running towards the wall. I charged up to him with a primal scream and brought my axe down onto it with all the strength I could muster. I felt a righteous fury like I had never experienced before. That single strike contained all of the abuse I'd ever suffered, all of the anguish and anxiety I'd been harboring in my heart. My axe ripped through the gnome's body effortlessly, hacking apart bone just as easily as muscle. It had entered his body at the neck and swung clear through his shoulder in a grim explosion of flesh. His head literally popped off, bouncing twice against the wooden floor before finally coming to rest next to the pool of blood surrounding his lifeless body.

When the scent of charred bone wafted up from below I gently stowed my axe back on my belt. I turned around, trying to avoid getting blood on my shoes, and I exited the building. My rage had quieted temporarily. I was still silently seething, but I hoped a visit to the local office of the newspaper could help to calm me down. I walked into the door holding the tattered old journal in my hand and I approached the man working there. "Hello, sir, might I ask your name?" I tried desperately to keep my voice level and calm so as not to put the man off too quickly.

He seemed perturbed at my intrusion. "I'm Sam Longwell. What can I do for you?"

In my anger I had very little in the way of sensibilities. "I have

evidence of a conspiracy you may be interested in."

He looked at me quite suspiciously, which in retrospect I ought to have expected. "What do you mean, 'conspiracy'? Is this some type of jest?"

I was so angry I was barely even thinking and I just blurted out, "The Industrial Council has been illegally breeding half ogres!"

It looked like he wanted to laugh. If I were more like Tyron I might've looked crazy, or desperate, but I was dead serious. He looked into my eyes and he could tell there was something more. "Let's say I was interested in this story... I would need proof."

I held up the journal, opened to the section that was still readable. "It's all right here."

"By the gods! This is astounding! I can make my reputation with a story like this... if you leave this with me, I'll print it in its entirety. It will be the story of the century!"

I couldn't tell if he was actually being serious or not. "What would you pay me for it?" I didn't think he would pay me just to get me out of his shop if he truly thought I was crazy. I had to be sure.

He stammered, surprised, "What, are you jesting? On a journalist's salary? I could give you... one hundred coins. What do you say?"

I nodded, handing him the book. "Okay, here it is." *It's a pittance, but I don't want your damn money anyway. I just want this story to get out, as loudly and as quickly as possible. The industrial council deserves to rot in hell for this!*

He started reading the pages I'd opened for him and he gasped audibly, "I cannot believe this! This is what I have been waiting for. I'll write this up now to get it in tomorrow's paper."

"I'll leave you to your work then. Good day." I wandered out of the shop and the rage that had been fueling my actions finally began to subside. In its wake I felt completely drained. The despair that I'd been keeping at bay came back at me in full force and the temptation to cry struck me once again. *Frederick... by the Gods, what I wouldn't*

give to just hold you one last time, to cry on your shoulder as I related the story about what just happened.... You would comfort me, as always, petting my hair lightly... I would hear your soothing voice resonate inside of your chest..

Thankfully, Sebastian pulled me out of my reverie. "That son of a bitch," he muttered, "I didn't like Willoughsby much before, but I sure as hell don't like him now. After that little display, Samantha, I'm thinking I ought to keep following you for quite some time. I mean... that was the plan anyway, right? So, where to next?"

He did have a valid question, and I supposed thinking about the answer was a whole lot better than devolving into self pity yet again. "We-" My voice was cracked and uneven. I cleared my throat, sniffing a bit, trying to not show too many signs of weakness. "We need to get to Tarant. There's a demonologist there, and I have to look up information on Elmer Burbottom."

Vollinger patted me on the shoulder gently. It almost seemed, on some level, like he understood... but the most I was going to get out of him would be that single gesture. I didn't quite know what to make of it. "To the docks, then?" He asked.

I shook my head, "No, why don't we take the long way? Do you remember how the prince was pacing back and forth when we were at the castle? I have a feeling that his bride-to-be never showed up. I'd like to search Razor's Cape for her."

Vollinger simply nodded and the group of us wandered off to the edge of town and beyond. *Still not a word from Virgil... he probably realized that he's not so fond of me after all. I wouldn't be fond of me, either...* I sighed deeply, trying to shake off my depression. I knew that Virgil was loyal to me, and it was rude of me to silently judge him. Truly, however, I didn't want a loyal follower... I wanted a friend, and I had thought Virgil was that friend.

After just over a week we were finally crossing the dreaded and dangerous shallows known as Razor's Cape. I didn't feel any better emotionally, but at the very least I was no longer trying to quietly cry myself to sleep every night. I was starting to wonder if I'd pushed

Virgil away by being too forward. I wanted to apologize, but it was so hard... facing him meant remembering everything I felt in that lonely graveyard. I couldn't make the words come out. Instead, the both of us stayed silent.

We scoured the wreckage around the shallows, and there was certainly plenty of it to scour. After searching two other empty boats we finally came across a rather freshly wrecked boat, the wood only having a trace amount of rot and not yet completely falling apart. There were many remains of various crew members on board, but I was drawn to the body of the rather lavishly dressed woman. I plucked off the ornate amulet from around her neck and read the inscription on the back of it, "To my dearest Aria." *That's the princess of Cumbria all right.* I sighed and pocketed the amulet. "We've found what we came for. Come on, let's deliver the news to Praetor." It was difficult for me to feel much in the way of sadness or pity at the situation, but if anything I felt guilty for my lack of sympathy. I felt like my lingering thoughts of Frederick were turning me into a terribly bitter person.

I returned to Cumbria by land, which was a rather difficult task but it certainly beat finding a ship to take me by the same route and winding up exactly like the princess. Virgil continued his silence, and I wasn't in any mood to break it. Thankfully, Terry spent much of the journey gleefully yipping and running circles around us. Sebastian cursed at him near constantly, and despite my mood it actually made me laugh a little bit. Having the two of them along with me was a constant source of comedy. It took us nearly two weeks to pass through the remainder of the shallows and the rest of the way towards Cumbria, but at last we made it.

Dernholm was as run-down and muck-ridden as ever. I looked around a bit for signs of Maximillian or Lianna, but neither were to be found. *At least she's still out there, looking for him. Maybe she's found him by now and convinced him to return.* Despite my past transgressions against the local guard, they seemed willing to grant me an audience with the king. He greeted me with what I expected was a fake smile. "Ah! The outsider returns!" I wasn't that fond of him either.

I curtsied politely to him, trying to be on my best behavior despite

my personal feelings. "I have unpleasant news... your daughter died on the way to meet the prince. I found her amulet."

"Keep her amulet; I don't want it. My daughter, my only heir, how could this have happened?"

Hmph. Heir? Since when has that ever meant anything to Cumbria? "The ship crashed, all hands were lost."

"Here are a few coins." He motioned to a guard to paid me a pathetically small sum of coins. "I'll thank you to leave me with my grief, my good lady." I didn't even have a chance to say farewell before the guards forcefully escorted me out. *Hmph. Grief. A man like you will never truly know what that word means. Don't worry, Praetor... the kingdom will be fine, no thanks to you.*

I thought once again of possibly paying Jayna a visit, but I couldn't. It was all I could do not to burst out crying whenever I glanced over at Virgil, or a stray thought reminded me of Frederick. Jayna was like a constant, walking reminder of Nathaniel. One day I was sure I would have it all sorted out and I'd make a special trip just to see how she was doing. The five of us left Dernhom and made the journey up to Black Root, taking the train from there to Tarant.

Virgil glanced at me several times during the train ride, and I looked back at him tearfully. I could tell that he had a lot on his mind and he wanted to say something, and I also suspected I had a similar look on my face. *We've both been through a lot, haven't we? Why is it we can't just come out and tell each other? What are we afraid of?* I didn't really know the answer to my own questions, but I supposed that if I did then I wouldn't so badly want to ask them. I thought on it for the duration of the train ride, thankful when the train finally arrived in Tarant. My eyes were growing quite sore from the frequency with which I rubbed the tears out of them. I wished I'd never gone back to Caladon, never found out the truth.

My first stop off of the train was to head back to the Tarant university. After a bit of searching I did find the professor of demonology that I remembered seeing on my last visit. He was a tall, bookish man with spectacles perched on the top of his head, and he remained completely oblivious to my presence even as I cleared my

throat repeatedly trying to get his attention. He seemed entirely focused on a telegram that he was reading. At last, he turned around and looked at me. "Oh, excuse me, I get so involved in these telegrams people send me. I get questions from everywhere about demons. Amazing, really."

I extended my hand out to him, "I don't believe I've had the pleasure. Who are you?" He shook my hand.

"Yes, yes, of course. You will have to excuse my excitement; I am new to this whole phrenology discipline. My colleague, Professor Gershwin, is doing wonderful things in the field. By way of introduction, I am Professor Eakins, scientist and Expert of Demonology."

Now that's just asking for trouble. "Scientician and demonologist? You're mixing magick and science?" Well, I suppose phrenology is more of a perversion than a science, so it could all work out.

He seemed to have a prepared response for me, and I imagined I wasn't the first to have asked that question. "I am a scholar, involved in research. Magick and science are the opposite sides of the same coin. To be truly knowledgeable, one must study a tremendous variety of things. Specialization is for insects and orcs."

Whatever you say, pervert. "I need information about L'anamelach."

He dropped his telegram on the ground and took his spectacles off in a rather dramatic motion, staring at me with them off. "Did you say L'anamelach? By the gods, why did you not say so sooner?"

Bloody hell, that kind of recognition can only be bad. Why do I always wind up in these situations? "Uh... can you tell me about him? It's very important."

"Yes, it is. Why do you persist in mucking about? This is serious business."

What? I'm not the one that's mucking about! Well... maybe a little. "I believe he is the Whytechurch murderer."

He nodded understandingly, "I had my suspicions those murders were

demonic in nature, but I never suspected L'anelach. This is bad news, indeed."

You're telling me. "Why is this so bad?"

I was amazed at just how well-versed the man was regarding the subject. He didn't even have to flip open an old tome or look through any of his notes to converse expertly on the subject. He was either very knowledgeable or I was in deep trouble. The answer was probably both. "L'anelach is one of the few demons that has the ability to possess a living being. As such, he can move among us undetected. In days of old, human sacrifices of thousands of victims were required to satiate him once he was summoned. He will be with us for a long time if we do not act to stop him."

I knew it. This couldn't be much worse, could it? No, wait, it can... and it will be... I'm sure of it. "He was summoned here? To what end?"

"That is a long story; let us simply say that the summoner is paying the penance for the summoning. He is the beast's present host, and has been for the past several years. I bet that elf wishes that he was possessed of a shorter life span."

It seemed obvious to me that the man had at least a little bit of contempt for elves, likely borne of jealousy. I couldn't say I was fond of most of them either, but that was rooted primarily in the nature of magick and technology, and reinforced by their haughty attitudes.

"How did it come to possess this elf?"

He began shuffling through his desk drawers, "As I said, it is a long story, but I think I have... ah yes. Here it is. The Legend of T'erre d' V'nt. You can read the demon's story in here." He handed me the book. I glanced at the front page briefly, then tossed it in my purse.

Well... time to hear what I came for. "I am afraid to ask, but how do I kill it?" It still needed to be stopped, regardless of how ancient and horrible it was. Inspector Henderson certainly wasn't likely to do it, and that meant it fell to me.

His answer was swift and matter-of-fact. "You must stab it through the heart with the Blade of Xerxes."

I nodded slowly, "Let me guess, it's in a godforsaken, horrible dungeon somewhere, guarded by demons."

"Not just any dungeon—the Pit of Fires deep within the Stonewall Mountains! Forged deep within the underworld by fire demons, it is the only weapon in Arcanum that can be guaranteed to strike the demon down. If one was to try to defeat the demon with anything but that blade, it would be disastrous!"

You can't just say something like that and then stop. "Why?"

At my prodding he continued, "If the Blade is plunged into the heart of the host, the demon will be sent back to the underworld as the unfortunate host dies. If he is killed by any other method, the demon shall be loosed from the confines of his host, and he will be virtually unstoppable."

I was beginning to understand Inspector Henderson's aversion to do any real work, and cursing myself for having such a soft spot for prostitutes. I couldn't really help sympathizing with them, though. I understood what they had to live through all too well. *If it weren't for Frederick, I would've probably fallen victim to L'anamelach-* I cut off my train of thought before the tears could surface. *This is no time to be thinking of Frederick.* "So where in the Stonewall mountains is the Pit of Fires?"

He was only too glad to explain, or at least try, "It's simple to find, really. The entrance is a bit southwest of the... no, that's not the best way... it's a bit west of... hmmm." I held my map out to him and he placed a dot on it with his pen. "Ah, yes, much simpler that way. There you go."

I folded the map up and put it back into my purse, bumping into the book as I did so. I took it out, intending on reading it. "Well, this ought to be an interesting adventure. Thank you for your time, Professor Eakins." I walked away into the next room and sat down to give the book a quick read.

The Demon L'anamelach

When the War of Thorns ended in 1385, King Wallis IV had accomplished something heretofore unimaginable. He had unified the scattered countries of the central continent under his banner, Terre d' Vnt, or, as we know it now, Tarant.

Peace reigned in Terre d' Vnt for an unheard of twenty five years until a wave of strange behavior seemed to overtake the king. The king's trusted elven mage, Vincent, whose real name has been lost to history, suspected demonic possession. This suspicion was borne out when the king started calling for virgin sacrifices to supply him with a steady diet of human

hearts.

Unbeknownst to Vincent, the king had begun toying with the dark powers in a misguided attempt to make himself more youthful. Unwittingly, he had unleashed the demon L'anamelach, the possessor.

Vincent was powerful, but immature and untested. Being overly sure of his abilities, he exorcised the demon himself, without much preparation. The beast tore the king's body apart as it was pulled from its host. Try as he might, the mage was unable to contain it. It ran amok over the countryside, killing hundreds of the king's loyal citizens.

Vincent acted without hesitation. There was only one way he knew to

hope to contain the beast. He began preparations to bind it to another mortal body, his own. This was not an easy task, as once unleashed L'anamelach would do everything in his power to keep his freedom.

Vincent's gambit was at most a limited success. After he himself had been possessed, he was, amazingly enough, able to have a slight modicum of control over the beast. For a time the evils of the demon seemed to be

being wrought on those of an evil heart, but eventually Vincent was to lose control of the demon.

The beast raged across the continent, killing all in his path. His bloody trail finally ended in Caladon, however. It would appear that Vincent was able to gain control over the beast long enough to drag himself underground and use his magicks to collapse the tunnels.

Neither demon nor mage has been seen since. It seems that Vincent sacrificed himself in order to bring the beast back to the underworld. For that, Arcanum owes him a debt of gratitude.

Were the demon to ever return to this world, those who would fight it must remember this - it is not to be killed with anything other than the Blade of Xerxes, which is buried in the Pit of Fires deep within the Stonewall Mountains! If the demon is struck down with anything but this blade, he will be unleashed upon the world, free of his human host!

I placed the book back into my purse, silently cursing my involvement in the whole damn thing. I ventured off next towards the hall of records. The woman there was starting to become quite familiar to me. "Good day, madam. Could you tell me anything about a man named Elmer Burbottom?"

"Burbottom? Hmmm. Let's see."

She looks through her records.

"I do have a street address for Mr. Burbottom, but it's in Ashbury. It's 14 Trellis Way..."

"Thank you, madam." *Ashbury? There's something about that I'm not quite noticing... Oh! The author! Kendrick Wales! The bartender there told me about him when I was pressing him for information... if only I'd realized sooner....* I turned to leave and noticed Virgil in the hallway, staring off into space absent-mindedly. A thought occurred to me and I turned back to the woman at the desk. "Could you tell me anything about Lawrence Brummond?"

"Hold on a moment." She flipped through the files quickly, pulling out one of them after a few moments. "Yes, I do have something here on a Lawrence Brummond, although he's not a citizen of Tarant. It's a newspaper article... here's a copy for you."

I took it, somewhat surprised, "Why, thank you, madam. You've been most helpful." She smiled at me appreciatively and I quick scanned over the paper.

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CALADONIAN MAN BRUTALLY MUREDRED!

**"Upstanding Citizen"
survived only by his brother**

Local gentlemen Lawrence Brummond was found dead in his apartment last evening, the victim of a brutal beating by one or more assailants. Currently, police have no suspects in the case.

"It's downright puzzling," said detective

William Prescott. "Nothing out of the apartment was stolen, and there was plenty to steal. From what we have pieced together, Mr. Brummond was a very upstanding citizen, from a well-respected family here in Caladon. Somebody took a dislike to him, and we aim to find out who and why."

Police are investigating various rumors that the murder is in some way connected to the Caladon Crime Ring,

purportedly headquartered in the Sobbing Onion Tavern, but no substantial evidence has yet been found.

Mr. Brummond is survived only by his brother Virgil, who the police are still trying to contact.

"We're hoping he might know something about the whole affair. We've had some trouble finding him."

WEATHER

The Meteorological Service Bureau of Tarant is Predicting sunny weather for the next Two to Three days, with an increasing Chance of Precipitation before the Passage of a Fortnight.

TAX INCREASE

The Parliament is again considering Raising the Levy of Incomes in Tarant by another 2 coins for every 100 earned. The Speaker has refuted all Public Criticism of the Increase, by Citing the importance of Public Works projects currently underway.

PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT

There will be a City Council meeting this Friday which is Open to the Public. The Meeting will commence sharply at 7pm.

His brother...? Oh, Virgil, why haven't you ever told me? I never knew you had a brother... though I suppose I never told you I had a husband, either. I stuffed the paper into my purse before Virgil could notice. I patted him on the shoulder wordlessly as I passed and he gave me an odd

look. "All right, everybody, it looks like we're headed to the Pit of Fires. Stock up on whatever potions and other supplies you might need, it's not going to be pretty."

The three of them nodded and Terry gave me a hearty woof for good measure. "We'll meet at the Garrillon Bridge in two hours." I split apart from them and traveled straight to the Bridesdale Inn, not bothering to stock up on any supplies of my own. I paid the woman behind the counter for one night's stay and didn't even bother to steal it back from her. She showed me to my room quickly, where I closed the door and drew up a nice, warm bath.

I sat in the bath for a long time, thinking about Frederick and about Virgil. I'd been trying so hard to keep myself busy that I hadn't spared either of them much thought in the previous weeks. That was really the point of keeping so busy, but every now and then I just needed to sit and have a good cry about it. I certainly hadn't gotten over Frederick's death, and I suspected that I never would. If it weren't for him I would've been abused and then likely killed. He treated me nicely, though, when nobody else ever had. Virgil was that way, too. Despite how badly I treated him, he was always nice to me. I really owed him an apology for how I'd been treating him lately... and possibly for prying into his past, though perhaps it would be best not to reveal that little tidbit just yet.

I got out of the bath a good hour after I was supposed to meet back up with the others. I quickly dried myself off, got dressed, and scurried out to the bridge. They were all there, waiting impatiently. Sebastian was petting Terry and for once Terry looked like he wasn't angry about it. "I'm so sorry," I said it while looking at Virgil, sort of practicing for the apology I wanted to give him another time. "I completely lost track of time."

Vollinger shrugged, "It's no trouble. We're all ready to go."

"Hey!" Sebastian yelled, "Maybe it's no trouble to you, but I was worried! I thought maybe Willoughsby got her. Even Terry didn't know where she went!"

"Pay him no mind," Vollinger insisted, "I told him not to worry, yet he

insisted."

I smiled at them. *Thanks, all of you. Especially Terry... I know you could've found me if you'd tried.* "Let's get going, we've got to make up for lost time."



The journey to the Pit of Fires from Tarant was a long one, taking us the better part of two weeks. I tried many times during it to approach Virgil and let him know that I knew how he felt, and apologize for pushing him while he was visiting the grave of his brother. That I knew more than I was supposed to, however, made me afraid I was going to slip up when I started talking to him. I knew I would be nervous, though I didn't really know why. I'd been traveling with Virgil for over three years, it didn't make any sense to feel so distant from him. It seemed the closer I was to people, the less comfortable I felt approaching them.

At last we approached the Pit of Fires, although it was hardly deserted. There were four people huddled around a campfire near the entrance: a human, two elves, and a halfling. The only woman among them was one of the elves, unfortunately the lesser dressed of the two. *Such a lack of shame!* The man called out to me as I approached, "Well met, maiden!"

I stared at him, and looked over his strange assortment of companions. I'd finally met a group of travelers who were even more unusual than my own odd little group. "Who are you?"

"I am Jayna Stiles! Noble warrior from Flame Keep! These are my brave companions, Malachi and Frondo! Whom might you be?"

As if I hadn't been focusing enough on my past, he had to go and ask me my name. "I am known as Samantha Colburn." *Sammy, Sammy, son of...* Merle was arrested, too, once Frederick exposed her dirty

little operation. The orphanage closed down after that, and the girls who remained there were moved into a newer, bigger facility. I'd been sprung from prison, thanks to Frederick, but I heard much later that Merle ended up dying there. She'd been old anyway, and the stresses of prison were harsh to her. For some strange reason I felt a bit of sadness when I heard she was dead, perhaps because she'd been the only mother I'd ever had. She sure didn't act like my mother, though, and I was quite possibly the only person to feel any sympathy for her after what she'd done. It was rather ironic.

Jyheirad spoke again, jolting me from my trip down memory lane, "Pray tell, what is your quest? Are you here to recover the famed Blade of Xerxes?"

I nodded, "Yes, as a matter of fact, I am."

"We too are here for that same purpose!" He seemed rather proud and happy for that fact, whereas I was neither. "We have been sent by Baron Sug himself to retrieve the Blade! A sizeable fortune awaits our successful return!"

I scowled at him, "I am here for a much more noble purpose than coin." *I never would've guessed something like that would come out of my mouth. I really have changed, haven't I?*

He seemed taken aback suddenly, and his voice sounded rather impressed, "Truthfully? And what might that be?"

"Demonic forces will consume the world lest I have the blade!" It was a bit overdramatic, sure, but it was also somewhat true. It was important to stop L'anelach.

"By the great god Bhuul!"

He smacks his fist into his hand.

"What is the nature of this beast?"

I'd better make this good if I want to convince him it's more important than his damned coin. "It prowls the night, feeding on the hearts of its victims!"

He dropped his hands down slightly, "It kills its victims one by one?"

That doesn't sound like a very big threat to the world..."

Oops. Not lying hard enough. "I never said it only killed one person at a time, it kills thousands!"

"Gods! We must stop this beast now! Damned be our meager fortunes! You wait here, we shall return with the..."

I nodded solemnly, more than happy to let him go in there instead of me. "May the gods be with you..." He and his three companions ventured into the cave and I heard all manner of horrible shouts and battle cries from within.

"So, uh," Sebastian scratched his head, "Think we ought to go in and save 'em?"

"They'll be fine." *I hope.*

Vollinger wiped down the barrel of his rifle with his handkerchief.

"How long do you suppose we should wait here for them to come back before going in and actually succeeding where they fail?"

I shrugged, "This fire probably won't last much past nightfall. Why don't we use it to keep warm and if they're not back by the time it goes out we'll go in after them?"

Sebastian grinned, "Hey, I like the way you think." I smiled at him and we sat down around the fire, taking a much needed rest.

After several hours the fire began to flicker and the sun fell behind the mountains, casting the entire valley in a slight reddish tone. Suddenly I heard footsteps echoing outward from within the cavern. I rose to my feet and put my hand on my axe, expecting that one of the beastly denizens inside was about to escape. Instead, much to my surprise, the four adventurers emerged.

"Here is the blade, my friend! May the gods speed your journey!"

Good god, they actually did it. I took the blade from him and slipped it into my purse. "Thank you." I was stunned and didn't quite know what else to say.

His companions were as silent as ever, but Jyheirad was his usual,

boisterous self, "You are most welcome, madam! If you'll excuse us, we should return to Baron Sug and tell him of what has transpired here!"

Yes, you do that. "Good bye, Jyheirad, and thank you again." He wandered off, and so did I, each of us with our respective groups of companions following. I didn't know exactly where Baron Sug lived, but it obviously wasn't in the same direction as Ashbury. Journeying to Ashbury would take half the time it would take me to travel to Caladon if I took advantage of the train, and I could always catch a ship from Ashbury. Aside from just that, I wanted to have a little chat with Elmer Burbottom before going back to Caladon.

We reached Tarant once again after another two weeks of travel and, luckily for us, there was a train leaving not long after we arrived. I purchased tickets for the five of us, paying a bit extra to persuade the conductor to allow Terry on board. I was tired and felt guilty for being so distant from Virgil for so long, and so I finally confronted him. "Virgil... look, I'm sorry for what I said to you in Caladon, all right? I don't know how else to say it, but I've been trying to think of the words for the past month and they just won't come. Please, won't you forgive me?"

He seemed surprised, "You think I'm mad at you? That's why you've been so silent? Look, if anybody should apologize it's me... my mind has been... elsewhere. I don't mean to upset you, I just have a lot on my mind lately. I really wish Joachim were around to talk to."

Now that's a name I've not heard in a good, long while. "Joachim? Do you think he'll ever show up? It's been almost four years."

Virgil shrugged, "I... I don't know... and, if you don't mind, I'd rather not talk about it. I'm sorry, but... I just can't talk to you about this."

You really have no idea how badly this all makes me feel, do you? You think you're alone, that nobody can help you... and in thinking that, you just keep pushing me further away... Virgil... "If that's how you feel, I'll not bother you any more about it."

He let out a heavy sigh and for the short remainder of the train ride

he stayed silent. I looked for Trellis Way upon arriving in Ashbury and found it easily enough. As soon as I stepped onto it, however, I heard a horrible scream from nearby. I ran into the building I heard it come from, shoving the door open without bothering to knock.

There was an obviously elven man inside just as I opened the door, but then there was a flash of violet light and he disappeared. A gnome was laying on the ground, bleeding heavily. "H-help me, please..."

I gasped, bending down to him and trying to rummage through my purse for spare salves. "Sir! What has happened here?"

His voice was trembling and uneven, "I was attacked... I've been wounded... it hurts, oh god, it hurts..."

I placed one hand on his shoulder comfortingly while I continued to try and dig out a salve with my other hand. "Sir! Who are you? How can I help?"

"Kendrick Wales. Have you ever heard of the book 'The Curse of T'sen-Ang...?'"

I nodded, cursing at my lack of a salve. It seemed I had lucked out by meeting up with those adventurers. When I'd failed to restock my supplies I hadn't realized I was completely out of salve. "Yes, I've read the book. That's why I'm here..."

He gasped and I winced at the all of the blood that leaked out of him. "W-what do you mean?"

I tore off a piece of my dress and tried to use it as some kind of bandage, but it wasn't large enough and I had very little skill at healing. "Perhaps this isn't the best time, but I'm looking for Elmer Burbottom."

"Elmer Burbottom?" He coughed, more blood coming up and staining the wood floor as he did so. "Why are you looking for him?"

I tried to explain as quickly as I could while still frantically searching for some way to heal the man in front of me. I glanced at Virgil but he sadly shook his head. *I guess even Virgil can't heal this.* "It seems he's

involved in something I'm investigating... Victor Misk is dead, and his widow..." *She and I are the same now...* I coughed suddenly, "Excuse me. Mrs. Misk would like to know who leaked the information that he still had a copy of the book."

Kendrick holds out his hand to me.

"Listen, friend, I don't have much time... the weapon used on me... I think it was magickal. I can feel the life leaving me even now." He closes his eyes, his teeth clenching against the pain.

What? But you just said...? "You are? I don't understand..."

His face began to grow pale, "K-Kendrick Wales is merely my pen name... I d-don't think anyone would buy a b-book by s-someone named Elmer B-burbottom..." He started laughing, then cringed as more blood stained his clothing, "It seems so trivial, n-now..."

So... that would make sense, then... "And so you paid Wesley the butler for the information?"

He nodded gravely, "Y-yes. And now it seems that the death of Victor Misk is on my head as well. It seems none of us can escape the C-curse..." I could see the intense fear in his eyes, something he feared even more than the death that surely would come to him any moment, "Perhaps not even you..."

I can't just let you die! "Kendrick, save your strength... I'll get some help..."

"I'm sorry, my friend. I don't think there's anything to be done... for what it's worth, I'm sorry. Tell the widow Misk I'm sorry..."

His body convulses.

"Kendrick! Hold on!" *Dammit, no!* I sighed as I felt the life leave his body at last, tears in my eyes. *Damn those bloody dark elves! I swear, when I find your damned T'sen-Ang I'm going to leave the entire bloody place in ruins!*

Chapter the Fifty First: A Prelude to Foul Darkness

After the horror of Kendrick's final moment had passed I was left with only stunned silence. The whole thing seemed so meaningless, so pointlessly violent and cruel. I walked through the streets of Ashbury, lost in thought. *Who next? They have to know I'm looking for them... I know that elf saw me...*

"Excuse me, madam!" I heard a man shouting after me. "Pardon me, you look familiar to me... would you happen to be Samantha Colburn?"

My hand unconsciously reached for my axe as I responded, "That depends on who's asking."

I could tell by the tone of his voice that he was rather flustered and embarrassed. "Forgive me. My name is Chester Miller, and I am the mayor of Ashbury. I read about your marvelous negotiations with Caladon in the paper, and I'm really in a spot here. I could use your help for just a moment, if it wouldn't be too much trouble."

Flattery will get you everywhere. I relaxed the grip on my axe a bit.

"What can I do for you, Chester Miller?"

"A planning meeting is being held to discuss the building of a monument to Lord Bettington, the greatest man ever to come out of Ashbury. We are very particular folk around here; if we do something, we try to do it right."

I already regretted even hearing him out. *Get to the point already.*

"Please, tell me more." I cringed at the idea that I'd just asked him to waste even more of my time.

His threw up his hands in disgust, "The problem is that everyone is arguing with each other about what to do. As Mayor, I have to find a

solution that pleases everybody. It is impossible! Some people want the monument in the center of town, others want it near the entrance, and nobody knows how we will pay for it! Furthermore, there aren't any local craftsmen up to the task of building the darn thing if we could pay!"

I sighed. "I understand your problem, Chester, but where do I come in? I can't give you a solution that will please all of them."

He shook his head nervously, "N-no, well... I mean, if you could just talk to the crowd, maybe suggest a few things and get them to agree on something. That's the important part, that all of them agree..."

I suppose I was just moping about anyhow... taking ten minutes to help this bumbling fool won't harm anything. "Very well, I will help you with your problem."

"Excellent! Follow me into the town hall. Once we get there, just go right on up to the podium and begin taking questions from the crowd. After the meeting is over, we can speak again."

I walked into the building after the mayor, glancing over at the crowd assembled inside. There were folk of all different kinds, not the easiest of crowds to please. Some were rich and some were poor, and there were all variety of races from halflings to half ogres. I stepped up to the podium and cleared my throat, ready to begin. *Perhaps it's arrogant to think so, but if anybody can handle this it's probably me.*

A sharply dressed gentlemen at the front of the crowd hollered at me nearly immediately, his rage apparent, "Why should we build a monument in the first place? That's what I want to know! Can you give us one good reason why we should build this thing?!"

Why? Why paint a picture, or play an instrument, or write a book? Are you daft? "A nice statue is an object of art and virtue for all to appreciate."

The crowd murmured amidst themselves, pleasantly surprised at my response. One man shouted, "By golly, she's got a point!" The vague whispers and bits of conversation that I could hear seemed generally positive. Chester looked at me from off to the side and gave me a

thumbs up. *So far so good.*

An elegantly dressed woman wearing a dress not unlike my own was the next to speak up from amongst the crowd. "There have been a lot of suggestions about where to put the monument. An improvement might be tastefully accomplished, but we are evenly split between two groups. The first group says that it should go in the town square. The other says it should go near the town entrance. What is your comment?"

Those are just opinions. Opinions are useless. What you really need is somebody who knows what the hell they're doing. "Conduct a design contest and vote for the best design."

"Hurray! Hip Hip Hurray! Astounding! Bravo! Brilliant!"

The crowd seemed quite receptive to my ideas. A gnomish gentleman in the front row of the crowd spoke out next, excited to see what my answer would be to the question he proposed. "And where do you propose that we get the money? How can the people of Ashbury afford such a luxury? I ask you for your proposal."

You're joking, right? You don't know where to get money? In Ashbury? I may be a thief, but you're still daft. "Certainly, in Ashbury, a wealthy benefactor could be found."

"Capital!" a woman shouted from the crowd. Everybody seemed to be rather supportive of the idea. I was most certainly in favor of any plan that involved getting the wealthy to share a bit, willingly or not. I glanced over at the mayor and he had a huge grin on his face. Obviously I was exceeding his wildest expectations. The gnomish gentleman spoke up again, pleased at the answer he'd received to his previous question.

"We don't have local artists talented enough to make a fine statue, so there's argument about who should receive our commission. If we cannot agree on the sculptors, then the project cannot proceed. Who would you recommend?"

You want to hire a craftsman to build something and you don't know the answer? Who the hell else is best at shaping and defining raw materials? "Dwarven craftsmen will give us the highest quality."

The crowd was really getting into the speech. They started cheering wildly, "Hip Hip Hurray!", "Bravo!", "Astounding!" I was impressed just how happy they were for me to point out the obvious, but I supposed it was all in the way things were said.

The woman wearing the dress much like my own spoke up again curiously, "Since the monument is going to be displayed outside, what materials do you suggest using? What kind of statue should we build?"

Well if it's too cheap it'll give in to the elements. Why would you use anything but the highest quality technology allows for? Some rich bastard will pay for it, so why not? "A weather resistant steel alloy statue on a granite base."

The crowd cheered again, stronger and wilder. I could've told them anything at that point and they would've given in. Compared to the Caladonian advisors, pleasing this crowd was a joke. The woman up front asked yet another question.

"We wish to honor Ashbury's greatest son, Oliver Bettington, with our monument. However, there is no agreement for the epitaph. Oliver was a great speaker, and one of his quotations would make the perfect epitaph. Which quote do you suggest we use?"

I wasn't overly familiar with Bettington quotes, despite my talents at public speaking. I tried to go with the quote I knew that sounded the least ridiculous, "Take an inch and you have a mile."

The crowd erupted yet again in thunderous applause and cheering. They shouted praises at me, at Ashbury, and even at the mayor. Eventually the applause died down and the crowd filed out of the building. Chester approached me as they left and I looked up at him smugly. *I suppose you asked the right person, eh?* I could only master so many things before at least one of them started going to my head a little. I tried to keep a lid on it.

"Congratulations, my dear woman, you have far exceeded my expectations! I have never seen anyone with the gift of oratory that you have. Thanks to your commendable performance, the good folk of Ashbury heartily support building a monument. There is still much work to be done, so I suppose I will be on my way. Good day, madam."

"It was but a trifle, sir. I am pleased to have been of service." I tried to remain polite, but inwardly I was scowling at the lack of any kind of payment. *I suppose his gratitude will have to be enough... if I'd wanted payment that badly, I should've asked. It won't kill me to do a good deed for once.*

As I wandered back away from the building my mind began to wander again as well. *You'd be proud of me, Frederick... I've helped Caladon enter into the Unified Kingdoms, and I'm helping people... not all the time, but I'm really helping and not just for what they can give me...* I sighed, my thoughts turning back to Kendrick and the Dark Elves. *Damnation! I'm a fool... a bloody fool, wrapped up in my own selfish concerns. There are even more tragedies that will occur if I continue mourning over Frederick. There will be time for mourning later, after I've burned T'sen-Ang to the bloody ground.* With a renewed sense of purpose I began charging towards the docks.

Now that Caladon was on friendly terms with the Unified Kingdoms it was a simple task to charter a ship to take me there, and not even all that expensive compared to the funds I habitually seemed to acquire. The ship took nearly two weeks to arrive back in Caladon, but at the very least I had obtained information to give to Mrs. Misk in exchange for what she knew about Roseborough. Virgil was still unpleasantly distant for the length of the trip, but he did make small talk instead of simply staring out at the waves the whole time. I didn't know what I could say to make him snap out of it.

We arrived back in Caladon around the early morning, so my first stop was at the Misk residence. I knocked on the door as usual and, much to my surprise, Mrs. Misk answered the door personally. *Looks like Wesley is off today. That's probably for the best.* "Good morning, Mrs. Misk. I've found the information you requested about who leaked the information about Victor."

She stared at me expectantly, no longer showing any signs of remorse over her 'dear' Victor. "You have? Who was it?"

I was almost jealous of her complete lack of devotion to her husband. At least she didn't have to live with the pain of losing somebody so dear to her. *I just wish it didn't hurt so badly...* "Who else? The butler

did it. He sold the information to Elmer Burbottom - Kendrick Wales is his pen name. I found the receipt, then tracked down Elmer in Ashbury and he confirmed it."

"I see."

There is a great sadness in her eyes.

"Well, I suppose you just never know about people. Even the ones closest to you. Perhaps there was some justice in his timely death. Thank you for your help, madam..."

You can't be serious... "What do you mean, his 'untimely death'?"

She shrugged it off as though it was old news. I could tell she cared deeply for her lost butler. "Haven't you heard? He was found in his home a few days ago, a knife buried in his heart. Perhaps there was something to that curse after all. Well, I thank you for your help in the matter, madam."

Yes... 'perhaps' indeed. Aren't you just pleasantly distant from this whole thing? I hope you rot in hell. "Before I go, could I ask you what you know about Roseborough, or its Gift Shop?"

"Roseborough? I've only been there once... Victor and I traveled there once to visit the grave of his father. I've never been there since. Small town, rather boring. Here, I'll show you where it is."

I see... it's all beginning to make sense now. The book on his person, and hiding the book in a place where only he and his 'dear old dad' would know where to find it. Looks like I'm not the only one with no compunctions about grave digging. "I see. Thank you for your help, madam." I departed the Misk residence, hoping to never have reason to visit it again. Not only did I find the lady of the house distasteful, but it also brought back so many memories that I was fighting so hard to hold back.

I stuck to my purpose with a rather uncommonly strong resolution. The world had to be rid of the Dark Elves, and the sooner the better. Since the way to T'sen-Ang seemed to lay through Roseborough, that was exactly where I went. I made a quick stop at Bolo's altar, just outside of Caladon, for a quick offering.

I said a rather uncharacteristically sincere prayer to the halfling god

and offered a small ring of decent quality that I'd pilfered from some place or another. I didn't suspect Bolo would care so much about what it was made of as he would where I got it, and I most assuredly hadn't paid for it. I found it at least a little odd that he was considered the god of halflings when there were plenty of talented thieves amongst all of the races, but theology was never my strong suit.

I felt the familiar warmth of a blessing wash over me as the ring vanished off of the altar. Any blessing that such a god would bestow upon me was bound to be a helpful one for a woman of my particular proclivities. I silently thanked him, promising to continue my noble quest to pilfer the valuables of the arrogant and the wealthy. With that small stop taken care of, I continued on the rest of the way towards Roseborough.

"If you don't mind me asking," Sebastian seemed confused, "What's all that altar business about anyway?"

I tried to think of a succinct way to explain it to him. "Well... I've never been the most religious sort, but let's say I'm starting to have a bit of faith in the old gods at the behest of a fine professor at the university of Tarant. Consider it a pilgrimage."

He scratched his head, "You don't really seem like the pilgrimage kinda sort to me."

"You're quite correct," I nodded affirmatively, "I'm really not." The blank stare he gave me suggested that wasn't quite the answer he'd been looking for.

Roseborough was a bizarre combination between a small town and a massive, grand luxury inn. There was an ornate fountain out front that would put even a few waterfalls to shame. I made to go inside, noticing a plaque sitting next to a weathered stone. The stone itself was carved with old runes, numbers, and symbols that didn't seem to hold any particular meaning to me. It didn't seem likely that *SW30* was supposed to have some kind of profound significance. According to the plaque, the stone had been moved to its current location from the center of the Ring of Brodgar.

I briefly remembered having read a book at one point on that subject, and I felt like a fool for not having thought of it earlier. The Ring of Brodgar had fascinated me for a time shortly after I'd first began spending most of my time in Frederick's study. It was nothing more than a collection of very large, very thick stones laid out in a perfect circle in the most odd shapes. Arcane runes were carved upon them, the meanings of which were completely unknown. It was said to be one of the most ancient magickal sites still left in Arcanum, and was largely shrouded in mystery. I'd finally lost interest in it when I moved on to the hundreds of other books in Frederick's study. *It wasn't supposed to be this way, Frederick... I've so many books and stories to share with you...*

I pushed my memories aside and entered the inn through the lavish set double-doors at its front. I approached the woman tending the counter and handed her the matchbook I'd received from Stennar so long ago. "Pardon me, madam, but could you answer some questions for me about this matchbook?"

"Matchbook?"

He looks at it.

"Yes... this is one of our matchbooks. What question do you have about it, madam?"

I know it's one of your bloody matchbooks. I'm not that much of an idiot.

"I found it on a dead man at the IFS Zephyr crash. Did you know him?"

An extremely perplexed look spread across her face as she began shaking her head. "No... I did not know anyone..." Suddenly she gasped as she came to a realization, "Wait! Yes... Yes. There was one person who it could have been..."

She paused, lost in thought for several moments. I finally prodded her for more information, "Yes? Who?"

With a sigh she started to explain, "Well... It is the strangest tale really. Late one night, I noticed all manner of strange light and sound emanating from the Ring. Not long after the ruckus had ceased, a haggard and disheveled man arrived here, inquiring about a room for

the night. The poor fellow looked quite a fright."

How fascinating. What in the hell happened that night? "Really? What was so strange about him?"

"He had quite an odd look about him: gaunt, clean-shaven, but with the features and clothing of a dwarf... yet he could not possibly have been a dwarf! No dwarf I have ever heard of would sacrifice his beard to the knife. Even today, I cannot say I truly knew him." I coughed uncomfortably, "Hmmm... yes... how very odd, indeed..."

She continued her story without really noticing, or at least not particularly caring, that I had some familiarity with the subject. "He had no coin about him. I was about to turn him away when he offered me an exceptionally fine dwarven blade as compensation. A beautiful piece it was, inscribed with the initials B.M.C. It fetched quite a price when I sold it..."

I couldn't hold what I knew in any longer. "He must surely have been a dwarf! Was there anything more?"

She shrugged helplessly, unsure of exactly what it was I wanted to know. To be honest, even I wasn't sure, I just had to know everything I could about what happened to Stennar.

"The only other inquiry he made of me was for the quickest route to Tarant. I told him that this was normally a lengthy journey, but that he was in luck! The maiden voyage of the IFS Zephyr would be leaving from Caladon shortly. It was surely to be the quickest way to Tarant."

I shook my head sadly, saying out loud what was on my mind at the time. "It was not luck that brought people aboard that doomed ship..." *That's when it all began... that's when I ran away from Frederick... dammit no! Now is not the time to dwell on that! That's in the past. Bloody hell, now I sound like Virgil... Virgil...*

The woman nodded, oblivious to my internal monologue. "Yes... the Zephyr was such an incredible tragedy. Oh yes... I let him know that he would need proper identification to board. He looked like the type to be lacking such, so I referred him to a man I had heard of in Caladon, Mr. Razzia, rather a shady character, but helpful when it comes to passports..."

I'd heard the name before. The shady junk dealers I'd often dealt with in selling off my ill-gotten gains had dropped the name a few times, either intentionally or in conversation with another customer that happened to be present. It seemed as though I wasn't having very good luck with keeping my thoughts in the present. I tried to focus yet again on Stennar and what exactly happened to him. "So he said he was going to get on the Zephyr? Are you positive?"

"He thanked me and went to his room. When I awoke the next morning he was gone. He did not say a word... just left. Oh well, I told you he was a strange one. Anyway, that is the only person I know that would have been on that accursed flight."

I sighed heavily, "Thank you for the information." *Stennar... so that's why your passport said Radcliffe. I'll have to continue this line of investigation with Mr. Razzia if I can track him down. The thieves underground was never terribly fond of me, but I'm not afraid of them any more.* I was slowly walking away from the counter, lost yet again in my thoughts, when a man rather unceremoniously slammed into me. I nearly lost my balance, and he went toppling backwards after the impact. The camera he'd been holding fell out of his hands and I reached out and grabbed it just in time to save it from being smashed on the floor.

He slowly climbed to his feet, brushing himself off, "So sorry about that, madam, I should pay more attention to where I'm going! Thank you so much for saving my camera."

I handed it back to him, "It's no trouble. To whom do I have the pleasure of speaking?"

"The name's Trevor. Trevor Lynwood. I'm a journalist for the Tarantian." He looked over the camera carefully, inspecting it for cracks or other damage. He seemed to be satisfied with its condition.

I was a little surprised to encounter anybody from Tarant so close to Caladon, but it struck me even more oddly that he was a journalist. Caladon had its own paper, and now that Caladon was a member of the Unified Kingdoms I imagined information would pass freely. "The Tarantian! What are you doing here?"

"Yeah... I'm on assignment. Although it's not going so well."

Will you just answer the question? I sighed. "What's the problem?"

He lifted the camera up, gesturing to it as he spoke, "Well... It was supposed to be simple. Take a picture, get back to Tarant as quick as I could. Nothing to it, right?"

I shrugged, "Sounds simple enough... what are you supposed to take a picture of?"

"The elusive Lethe Wyvern." *The Lethe what?* "Ever heard of it?" In fact, it seemed like it was one of the few things I hadn't heard of, though I supposed it was either a silly legend of some kind or else the lack of information on it was his very reason to photograph it. *Hmm. The Stillwater Giant was just a silly legend, too.*

"Well, legend describes it as a tremendous dragon. Wings, claws, the whole bit. The difference with the Lethe wyvern, I've read, is in its attack."

"A dragon? Around here?" It occurred to me that I ought not be so skeptical after everything I'd been through. A beardless dwarf was on the more believable end of the things I'd seen. If it really did exist, however, then I was naturally curious about it. "What is different about its attack?"

He explained further, but I could see that he was quite uncomfortable regarding the details. "Apparently, every time it strikes, it destroys a bit of its victim's memory... Some sort of venom or something. After enough attacks, the victim can't even remember how to flee and the Lethe's got itself an easy meal."

I was torn between thinking I could really use a few hits from that thing and being horribly afraid of losing what little I had left of Frederick: my memories of him. "That sounds like a pretty dangerous creature."

He nodded, shuddering, "Yeah. From my research I've surmised that very few creatures ever survive an encounter with the Lethe. And those few that do usually don't remember exactly what or who they escaped from."

...and this was supposed to be a stroll in the park? "I certainly don't see anything 'simple' about that assignment."

"Well... I didn't really believe it. Thought it was all a hoax. I just came up here because my editor, Mr. Wright, wanted a hot story. He thought if we could get a picture of the wyvern our sales would boom."

The one time I'm willing to believe the damned thing actually exists...

"Turned out to be a hoax, huh?"

His face went instantly white. "No... that's just it. I've seen it! A truly horrible beast! I caught the merest glimpse... But that was all it took! It was gigantic! My heart froze... my skin began to crawl... I'd swear I even forgot which way I should run..."

This adventure of mine is leaving me with precious little doubt remaining for any future legends and hoaxes I come across. Lucky for me, I have enough skepticism to last me seven lifetimes. "It sounds horrible. So you didn't get the photograph?"

"I couldn't even snap one shot off! I was that terrified!" His whining was more than a little pathetic, but I supposed there was a time when I, too, was that scared of anything I thought threatened me. "And I'm not going back... There's no way I'm going back! What am I to do? Mr. Wright will fire me for certain!"

The opportunity for profit was obvious. "You just need a photograph? You don't need to confront it?"

"Yes. That's correct. I just need one photograph."

Visibly terrified.

"But I can't do it. I can't."

I winked at him mysteriously, "What if I took the photograph?"

The look on his face alone was worth my asking. "You? You would want to risk yourself to photograph this beast? Why would you do that?"

Why else? You don't think I'm just that good-natured, do you? "I'd get paid, wouldn't I?"

He seemed rather unsure of himself suddenly, although it wasn't like he'd been exactly bristling with confidence moments earlier. "Uh... but of course. I'm being paid 500 coin for the shot. But, I've spent part of that in supplies so far. I wouldn't be able to pay you any more than 300..."

"Supplies"... you certainly can't expect me to foot the expense for your little luxury inn-stay. "300 coin? For risking my mind? I think it's worth more than that."

"Yes. I definitely agree it's worth more than that. Hmmm... You know, you would be saving my career. I could throw in some of my own coin for that cause. If you'd do it... I'd pay you the full 2,000. What do you say?"

I could get that for answering a single question, but this just seems more honest... and interesting. "It's a deal. What do I need to do?" *Let fate decide whether I ought remember the pain in my past...*

He handed his camera back off to me and I stuffed it in my purse. "Here. Take my camera. All you need to do is get within visual range of the Lethe, then use the camera on it. After that, I'd run like the wind! Here, I'll mark your map with the location. Ah, also... I have heard rumors that an old bridge exists somewhere near that location. I did not have a chance to look for it, but it may be of interest to you, an adventurer like myself."

I still don't feel quite right about that term. What's it going to take before people stop referring to me as an adventurer? "Thanks, Trevor. I'll get that photograph for you in no time!" From the way my map looked, I would easily be able to visit the home of the Iron Clan while I was in the area for the picture, and if such a land bridge did exist I would be able to easily travel up to Qintarra to report on the location of the Dark Elves. It was reason enough for me to head up that way, but I first needed to get my hands even dirtier.

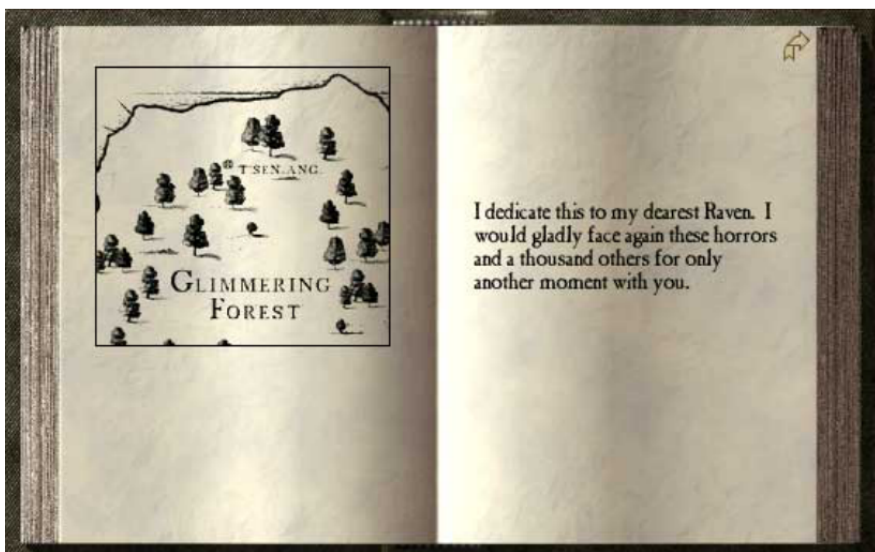
There were a surprising amount of freshly filled (or perhaps re-filled) graves over in the back of the inn. To make matters worse, the graves had either blank tombstones or tombstones that were so worn and faded with age that they might as well have been blank. It was still barely past noon, but the area was so isolated and there were so few

people present that I didn't think there would be too much harm in getting what I came for and then going.

Whoops... no, that's not the one... so sorry, old chap. It was actually kind of embarrassing to just randomly dig up people's graves while my friends just sat there and watched the desecration in action, but I wasn't the bastard that buried the old book here in the first place.

I dug up yet another wrong grave, although I was interested to note that there were coins and a ring inside of the casket with the skeleton. *I don't think he'll really be using those.* Sebastian started laughing when I pulled the coins out of the casket and stuffed them in my purse. "Hey, can Terry take a bone out, too?" *Oh, quiet, you.* Terry yipped and Sebastian pet him on the head gently.

Luckily for me, the third time seemed to be the charm. My breath caught in my chest when I pulled the book out of the casket. I read the title of it out loud, "T'sen-Ang - Horror Among the Dark Elves. I've found it at last." I cracked open the front cover, reading excitedly.



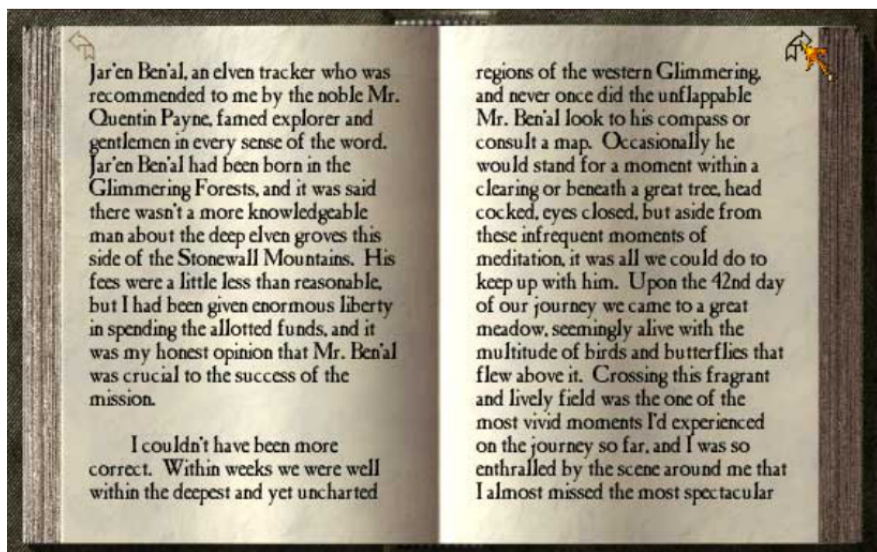
Dearest reader, it is only with the greatest fear and trepidation that I share this harrowing tale with you today. Even here, safe within the confines of my own home, I am still overcome with dread at the thought of what am I about to tell you, and what it might mean for me or those close to me. And yet I feel compelled to do so, and the great Muse guides my pen to this paper, and the words flow forth from the darkest regions of my heart and mind where they have stayed well-

hidden until this very evening. I beg of you, give ear to my confession, and, if it please you, take this tale from me and return only your belief and trust that what you are about to hear is only and nothing but the truth.

My name is Renford A. Terwilliger, born of the outlying regions of Ashbury, not far from the lair of Bellerogrim, where they found the bones of the great dragon. My childhood was a bright one, full of happiness and light, and my parents gave to me all that a child might need. I was schooled both practically and excellently, and when my 18th year came round I was accepted into Tarant University, and ultimately found my way into the Tarantian Zoological Society. Archaeology was first love, but my first assignment with the Society was with the Cultural Anthropology department. It was somewhat of a farce, actually, but the Society had been given an enormous grant by one of Tarant's leading philanthropists for a very specific purpose. That purpose was to confirm the existence of the Dark Elves.

Every man, woman and child in Arcanum has been raised on ghost stories and bedtime tales of these strange people known only as the Dark Elves. To the anthropologist, they are the proverbial oasis in the desert; proof of their existence has always literally disappeared into the air. No man had ever set eyes upon them, and not one shred of physical evidence had ever been found to establish that they were real. Myths and legends were plentiful, but, for the itinerant scientist, these mean less than nothing. What was needed was undeniable evidence, and I set out on this adventure with determination and confidence in my ability to bring forth just that. Had I known what lay ahead, I would have forsworn both anthropology and philanthropy, and returned to work as a day laborer in the Ashbury shipyards. Better the back-breaking work than the nightmares I face every night.

Before leaving Tarant, I employed the services of a certain



Jar'en Ben'al, an elven tracker who was recommended to me by the noble Mr. Quentin Payne, famed explorer and gentlemen in every sense of the word. Jar'en Ben'al had been born in the Glimmering Forests, and it was said there wasn't a more knowledgeable man about the deep elven groves this side of the Stonewall Mountains. His fees were a little less than reasonable, but I had been given enormous liberty in spending the allotted funds, and it was my honest opinion that Mr. Ben'al was crucial to the success of the mission.

I couldn't have been more correct. Within weeks we were well within the deepest and yet uncharted

regions of the western Glimmering, and never once did the unflappable Mr. Ben'al look to his compass or consult a map. Occasionally he would stand for a moment within a clearing or beneath a great tree, head cocked, eyes closed, but aside from these infrequent moments of meditation, it was all we could do to keep up with him. Upon the 42nd day of our journey we came to a great meadow, seemingly alive with the multitude of birds and butterflies that flew above it. Crossing this fragrant and lively field was the one of the most vivid moments I'd experienced on the journey so far, and I was so enthralled by the scene around me that I almost missed the most spectacular

vision given to the eyes of mortal man.

Qintarra, the great elven tree-city, lay within the towering trees at the end of the clearing, hanging like a cut jewel in the crown of a king. The Mother Tree, almost 400 feet tall, housed the intricately carved Hall of Truth, which shone white and smooth in the noontday sun. Impossibly thin walkways wove in and out of the boughs of the

great tree, not taking away from its natural beauty, but adding to it, as if the city were merely a convenient and beautiful tangle of leaves and branches, tattooed with the flowing runes and symbols in the ancient elven tongue. And among these, the graceful and lithe forms of the elves, singing their beautiful songs and looking down upon the rag-tag group of men with curiosity and amusement.

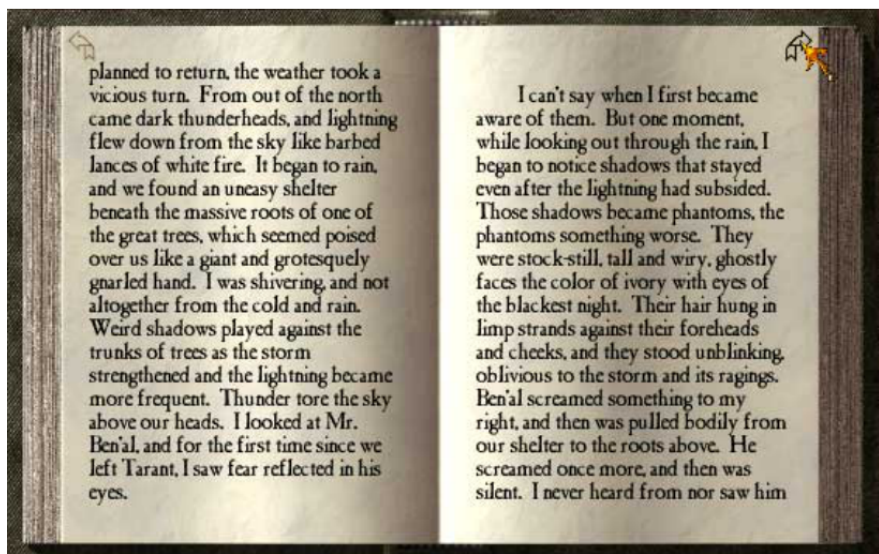
Of Qintarra I can say only this; the month I spent there was the best of my entire life. I learned much less about the Dark Elves than I would have liked, almost nothing at all, really, but the moments I spent there were strange and wonderful and breathtaking, and I will not do them a disservice by attempting to put them into words. Suffice it to say that I learned there as a young man what often takes others a lifetime, and to my teacher I give heartfelt thanks and the warmest greetings. There's not a day that goes by that I don't think of you...

We left the trees of Qintarra with little more than faint whispers about the Dark Elves and where they might be found. The elves of Qintarra were very reluctant to speak of them, and they begged us to forget such foolishness and to go home to Tarant. I, of course, would hear no such talk and we traveled on, north this time, as Mr. Ben'al believed he had uncovered a clue as to their whereabouts during his investigations while in Qintarra.

And he had discovered a name. T'sen-Ang. The home of the Dark Elves.

We traveled for 17 more days, exhausting our supplies and sending most of the party back to Tarant. The forest had become thicker and more brambly, and it seemed that many of the trees were adorned with thorns, some more than a foot long. Another week and it was only Mr. Ben'al and myself, and we had agreed to return before the first of the month if we failed to find any further evidence of the Dark Elves existence. That gave us 6 days to find T'sen-Ang, and we pressed on despite our anxiety and fatigue.

On the day before we had



planned to return, the weather took a vicious turn. From out of the north came dark thunderheads, and lightning flew down from the sky like barbed lances of white fire. It began to rain, and we found an uneasy shelter beneath the massive roots of one of the great trees, which seemed poised over us like a giant and grotesquely gnarled hand. I was shivering, and not altogether from the cold and rain. Weird shadows played against the trunks of trees as the storm strengthened and the lightning became more frequent. Thunder tore the sky above our heads. I looked at Mr. Ben'al, and for the first time since we left Tarant, I saw fear reflected in his eyes.

I can't say when I first became aware of them. But one moment, while looking out through the rain, I began to notice shadows that stayed even after the lightning had subsided. Those shadows became phantoms, the phantoms something worse. They were stock-still, tall and wiry, ghostly faces the color of ivory with eyes of the blackest night. Their hair hung in limp strands against their foreheads and cheeks, and they stood unblinking, oblivious to the storm and its ragings. Ben'al screamed something to my right, and then was pulled bodily from our shelter to the roots above. He screamed once more, and then was silent. I never heard from nor saw him

again.

I ran headlong past the elves in front of me, swinging blindly to clear a path. I was mad with fear, and my feet carried me deeper into the forest. I thought I heard dark and twisted laughter above and behind me, and shadowy figures darted among the trees to my left and right. Thorns tore at my arms and legs, and I stumbled among stones and

the underbrush, screaming incoherently. More than once, great elven arrows sunk into the trees around me, grazing my skin as they flew by. They were playing with me, enjoying the hunt, waiting for just the right moment. My head was light from exhaustion and blood loss, and I fell to my knees, gasping for air.

When I looked up, I saw it.

There, in the trees above me, was T'sen-Ang, the home of the Dark Elves. Unlike Qintarra, T'sen-Ang was an abomination, slouched in the branches like a great beast waiting for its prey. There were sputtering fires all along its battlements, and great spikes protruding from every surface like dragon spines. And I saw robed figures, gaunt and terrible, lined along its walkways and looking down upon me, beckoning, it seemed, for me to join them. I screamed again, and the figures seemed to raise their voices in unison, a terrible call without sound or meaning, but I heard them nonetheless. They were cursing me. They were welcoming me.

In moments I was surrounded again by my pursuers. Through the downpour I saw them unsheath daggers, their ghostish smiles floating towards me as the thunder roared above. I closed my eyes, praying to whatever god would hear me. There was nothing else I could do.

And then, from nowhere, arrows were flying from behind me and above me. In moments I was encircled completely with the half-buried shafts of the thickest hunting arrows, and the Dark Elves around me whirled to and fro in confusion. One pulled his bow from his back and notched an arrow in one flowing movement, but was shot through the heart before he'd raised it past his shoulder. He fell silently, unbelieving. The others, looked at me for a moment, the purest hatred harbored in their eyes, and then disappeared into the night, hands conspicuously at their sides.

Amazed and spent, I fainted.

I awoke some days later, many miles from northern reaches of the Glimmering. I was alone, but my wounds had been treated and my supplies had been replenished. I was back in Tarant not two weeks later. I never met my rescuers, but I can guess who they were and

where they were from, and I thank them if they are reading this. Without their aid, I surely would have died there in the shadow of T'sen-Ang.

And so, dear friend, again I beg of you to believe these words and the man who has told them to you. I do so only to share this burden with others, to gain comfort among those of my kind. At the very least, let these words stand as a warning to you. Often, evil is a tangible thing, and sometimes it is a people and a place. Such are the Dark Elves, and such is the hell that is called their home.

I have never returned to the Glimmering Forest, and I pray that I never do. Some things are better left alone.

Chapter the Fifty Second:

Shadows of the Past, Part One

Bloody Dark Elves...! Now that I've got the location of your precious T'sen-Ang I will not ignore you any longer... you'd better be bloody ready for me. After reading through the book I stuffed it into my purse and began storming northward. "Any of you are welcome to stay behind if you would like. I have to do this, but I won't blame you if you'd rather not risk your lives."

Vollinger patted the stock of his rifle, "I've been with you this long, and I don't plan on abandoning you now."

Sebastian grinned and pet Terry on the head. Terry gave a solid woof. "What's my alternative? Going back to work for Willoughsby? No thanks... no way. I'm with you."

I looked over at Virgil, but his stare was distant. "...Virgil?"

He seemed startled. "Oh, uh... sure. Yes, of course I'm coming along."

Dammit, Virgil...! Snap out of it! I sighed. *I've no right to be upset with him... he and I are the same, if only he'd realize it...* "Well, I... I don't really know what else to say besides thank you... thank you all for sticking by me." *...you're all I have left...* "Come on, there's no time to lose." We traveled to the north along the western edge of the Stonewall mountains encroaching upon the Iron Clan caverns as we traveled. We were so close that I actually spied the entrance as I passed it and stopped for a short while to examine it.

There was a rusted, iron gate buried in the ground and the smoothly shaped iron pedestal next to it looked to be the lock. I traced the outline of the pedestal inset with my finger, forming a mental image of the key in my mind. Whatever key was used to open the damned

thing was like nothing I'd ever seen. It was huge, for a key, and looked like it would have to be shaped like some kind of a diamond. I committed the shape to my memory and made a note to look out for it. *The key of glass...? Hmm.*

We continued our travels northward towards the river, where the Lethe Wyvern roamed. I patted the camera in my purse gently, anticipating the sight of the beast. Travel was slow, and we all searched for various activities to occupy our minds while we walked. Sebastian found the skull of some kind of small animal, picked clean by vultures. He picked it up with a chuckle and tossed it ahead of us, yelling, "Hey, Terry! Fetch!"

Terry woofed and took off after it. Surprisingly, Sebastian was able to toss the damned thing a pretty good distance. I was sure I could do better, even if I couldn't aim for the life of me. Terry leapt up at the skull as it neared the ground, grabbing it out of the air with his teeth. He ran back up to Sebastian and held the skull up to him proudly, a muffled woof emanating from around the skull. Sebastian started laughing and laughing, then he took the skull from Terry and threw it again. I was glad Terry seemed to be expanding his mental catalogue of people not to maul.

Eventually we did arrive at the river, although travel near the western shores seemed to take twice as long as traveling anywhere else. Perhaps it just seemed that way due to the intense boredom. The river stretched all the way from the mountains to the ocean, so wide that I couldn't even see either end of it from the middle position I'd walked to. I gazed up and down the river, my eyes searching for the so-called bridge that was supposed to get me to the Glimmering Forest.

I didn't see a bridge, but on my second pass along the river I did see a great, big beast with scales the color of midnight and teeth the size of my axe. I pulled the camera out of my purse and aimed it at the creature carefully, waiting for the exact moment at which it looked most menacing. The more horrible it looked the more gossip it would stir up, even though nobody else in Tarant was likely to ever set eyes on it after the story Trevor would print.

I pressed the shutter button on the top of the camera and the bulb flashed brightly. An ear-piercing screech issued forth and the creature turned with an angry look in its eyes. *Uh... hi.* It flapped its massive wings and dove at me with the speed of a passing train, narrowly missing as I tumbled out of its way. I pulled my axe off of my belt and prepared for its next dive, but instead it landed on the ground with a menacing glare.

The battle was on, and running wasn't an option. Even if I'd wanted to, it would be impossible to outrun the blasted thing when it could fly so bloody fast. Given its incredible speed, waiting seemed like suicide. I charged the beast, hoping to catch it off guard, but I wasn't nearly so lucky. It whipped its tail around at me with incredible agility. I reflexively brought my axe up to parry its strike and the barb at the end of its tail glanced off of the edge of my axe, a small wisp of smoke rising up in its wake. As soon as I could take another step its tail lashed out again angrily, but I was more prepared. I swung my axe, hoping to sever the wyvern's primary weapon and make its backside safe for a brutal assault.

Somehow, I was too slow. Its tail swiped past my axe and made for my shoulder. I winced, not nearly fast enough to dodge out of its way, and then with a sudden bang the end of its tail severed and dropped to the ground, a spray of blood squirting just past my shoulder. I opened my eyes, shocked to see it thrashing about in pain while it emitted another horrible screech. *Thanks, Vollinger.* The wyvern howled in pain and rage, swiping a claw at me clumsily. I sidestepped its ill prepared attack and dug my axe into its wrist, lopping off yet another of its weapons.

If it hadn't been fully enraged before, it was truly in a frenzy now. It flapped its wings and I was knocked prone by the unexpected force of the air blowing past me. It flew forward, one of its massive horns grazing me in the side. I was momentarily worried, but thankfully its poison seemed to be limited to its now-severed tail. I was hurt, but the wyvern had made a grave mistake in exposing its back to me.

Although it was certainly the toughest dragon like creature I'd ever faced, the wyvern was most assuredly not the first. I knew exactly where and how to strike it, which parts of it would make it squeal the

loudest. Terry leapt into the air in my defense, diving for the wyvern's neck. He latched on brutally, although even his teeth had a difficult time piercing the protective scales on the creature's throat. *Bloody hell, that dog can bite through metal and yet the Lethe's scales remain unbroken.* Even if he was outmatched, Terry was a wonderful distraction, leaving me ample opportunity to strike.

First my axe slid past the scales on its lower back, cutting into a particularly vital organ and causing it to drop down onto one knee. My next blow was aimed to kill, and my aim was rarely off. Blood fountained forth from the gaping slash that cut nearly completely through the creature's chest. Its spine had been neatly severed, and the beast would hunt no more. Terry dropped to the ground with a whine, but the rest of us were silent. I placed the camera back into my purse and began once again searching for the bridge.

Good to know it's not just a rumor, then. I have to wonder who put this here...? As the river was quite wide, it was because of that bridge alone we were able to cross. I was sincerely thankful for the shortcut, not wanting to waste any more time than I had to in reaching T'sen-Ang. Wasting time was a relative term, however, as the northern reaches of the Glimmering Forest were certainly not near by any stretch of the imagination.

We traveled for so long and battled so many creatures in the forest that I lost all track of the days. The sun rose and set and then rose again, yet for the life of me I could not say how many times it had done so since I'd left Caladon. I shouldn't have been overly surprised at the length of my journey given that I was crossing from one end of the bloody continent to the other, but that thought did little to ease the sheer amount of time it took.

When we were about halfway through the forest, I rummaged around my purse for a spare bag and I began collecting the essences of all the wisps I killed during the journey. Those buggers were the most aggressive of the whole lot, and hardly a day passed when I didn't find myself having to put another one down. *I've no bloody clue what kind of wisps any of these are, but one of them is bound to be a Vol'ars Wisp.* I thought briefly of stopping in Quintarra to drop the essence off, but from the look of the map it seemed like it would be almost a

week out of my way. I could always return after T'sen-Ang was... taken care of.

Just as the book had described, the woods grew dark and twisted as we approached T'sen-Ang. The days seemed shorter, what little of them could even be seen beneath the dense cover of the forest. Even the trees themselves seemed somehow darkened, almost sickly. Their leaves were pale and dark, and the wood took on an almost purple hue. The air itself seemed to grow thick, though the strong presence of magick was no doubt a part of that. When it seemed like my nerves could hold out no longer I found it at last.

It was situated in the trees, much like Qintarra, only it was different... twisted, and horrible. The trees were bent and broken to serve the needs of the Dark Elves. Theirs was a life of subjugation instead of harmony. Qintarra felt at peace with nature, but T'sen-Ang was the exact opposite... it didn't feel at peace with anything. The guard in front of the stairway leading upward was wearing dark, oiled chainmail and he glared at me hatefully as I drew near. I held my hand near the oaken handle on my axe and watched the elven guard carefully, prepared to do whatever I must.

Although he continued to glare as I drew closer, he didn't make any motions to draw his weapon, nor could I feel any strong magicks emanating from him. *If he's not already figured out who I am, perhaps I can talk my way through this... I must be patient, I can't annihilate them nearly as easily as I annihilated the gangs in the Boil. A couple gangs of thugs are quite the far cry from an ancient order of violent elves....* I coughed nervously as I approached, trying to rein in my fears and uncertainties. "I'm here to see M'in Gorad." Thankfully, my voice was firm and even, almost threatening. I was beginning to impress myself with my mastery of the persuasive arts. Even Vollinger may not have been able to tell just how nervous I was. Then again, he always was a rather perceptive bastard.

The guard looked me over grudgingly, his look of baleful hatred fading to one of almost boredom. I'd changed in his eyes somehow, no longer a stranger with a group of unfamiliar faces. I was still strange, yet also familiar enough to become mundane. "You are aware of the procedure. Where is your amulet, Molochean?" *So that's*

it... of course, the Molocheans are working for the Dark Elves! Why didn't I realize it sooner?

I pulled out of my purse one of the amulets I'd pilfered off of the dozens of Molocheans I'd killed, showing it to him. His eyes drifted over the lightly bronzed metal it was made out of, glancing at the eye in the hexagram. "You may enter." I barely acknowledged him, simply turning and heading up the stairway. I breathed a deep sigh of relief when he was out of sight, unable to maintain my cold and careful facade any longer. It seemed rather ironic to be posing as a member of the organization contracted to kill me, but that was the real beauty of that particular deception.

I shuddered uncontrollably as I reached the top of the stairs. *Who would WANT to live in a ghastly hellhole like this?!* The skulls of massive beasts were placed on posts near the entrance, and that was one of the less horrifying things about the awful place. The wood was half rotted and utterly filthy, yet only through the callous misuse of magick did it manage to hold together as solid platforms and walkways. Blood stained several surfaces and the only trees that could be seen when looking out from the platform were pale, withered, and half-dead.

Ugh. I've got to get the hell out of here, but not before meeting with M'in Gorad and putting a stop to all of this. No more innocents have to die... I looked around for anything that seemed significant and I saw a rough shape that I recognized. At the end of a bridge there was a large, hollowed-out tree clearly crafted out of mimicry of the chamber I'd met the Silver Lady in. I knew in my heart that M'in Gorad would be staying in such a place. I walked over the bridge and I strode into the chamber bearing the illusion of confidence, although I was so afraid that I felt like I might vomit any second. My knees were weak and wanted desperately to tremble, but I concentrated all of my efforts into my external appearance. I controlled every single motion I made, from the cocky tilt in my stare to the slow, relaxed confidence of my breathing. I was supposed to be a confident assassin, and if I didn't look the part I wouldn't get any second chances.

"When my guards informed me a foot soldier of the Molochean Hand was here to see me, I couldn't guess what you could possibly have to speak with me about."

Her voice was haughty and nasal, clearly annoyed at the presence of non-elves. Her contempt was clear and it made me wonder why she bothered dealing with the Molochean Hand at all, if their membership policies were so unfortunately lax. *Because she can control them, of course... the 'lesser' races are tolerable as long as they know their place...* The more I studied her the greater the advantage I could gain. So long as I remained humble and fluffed her ego in the right ways I stood a good chance of escaping alive, without her ever realizing just who she'd been talking to. "I've come to talk about your banishment of the dwarves." *At last, I'm finally here... I've been searching for so many years, I've seen and experienced so much, and I've lost much as well. It all comes down to this.* I breathed in and out deeply, calmly... I was an assassin, just checking in for additional information.

She frowned at me impatiently, her expression bordering on a sneer. "What concern are a bunch of inbred dwarves to you? You should be out hunting down that blimp survivor instead of wasting my time, assassin." *Yes, that's it... even you can't see through my deception...* The character of the assassin began to take shape in my mind, and I pushed down the feelings of Samantha Colburn, becoming the persona I had only just begun to imagine. I was a member of the Hand, I had been there dozens of times... I had even spoken with her before, though she didn't remember my face...

"The Black Mountain Clan directly relates to our search for the blimp survivor." I glared at her confidently, curiously. My confidence in myself grew as I skillfully acted the part borne of my own knowledge of how the Hand worked. I had her fooled and, as long as I remained careful to not slip, I would eventually get what I wanted. There was no need to be impatient, I just had to act like a subservient fool and she'd spill everything in no time at all.

She crossed her arms, leveling her eyes at me along with her accusations, "I think you are searching for anything to excuse the Hand's inability to locate the survivor." *So that's the report? They can't find me? Hmph. The agents of the Hand have located me just fine, many times over. They just haven't lived the experience.*

I pushed my personal thoughts out of my mind, focusing more on

how I was supposed to be acting. I was not Samantha Colburn, I was a nameless assassin of the Hand. I may have had a name once, now lost to time and servitude. My loyalty to the Hand was all that mattered, and if I didn't find out about the Black Mountain Clan I would be unable to serve appropriately. I tilted my head in the other direction and shifted the way I stood, carefully considering the expression on M'in Gorad's face. "We're more effective when we are given all necessary information."

She gives me a long, studied look before she answers.

"And just what do you think we are keeping from you?"

The Hand had been left in the dark... they were mere servants to this woman, only told what she deemed necessary and nothing more. As servants, they never dared question, they only acted. As a member of the Hand, there was much I didn't know, but my desire to serve was strong. I alone dared to question, so that I might succeed where my brothers had failed. What was it I needed to know? What would lead to finding the blimp crash survivor? "We need to know where the Black Mountain Clan were banished to."

She spat at me openly, obviously angry at my persistence. Wasting her time with a pathetic human was beginning to annoy her, and she didn't like the questions I was asking. "The Molochean Hand should have no concern for the whereabouts of a few measly dwarves."

I was starting to lose my control over the character of the assassin in my head. M'in Gorad's sheer arrogance roused the anger deep within me, and the more I chatted with her the more I wanted to strangle her scrawny, elven neck. "We think the survivor was attempting to contact them." *Well, it's true... 'she' is.*

A smug grin spread across her face. "That would be an impossible task for someone of her... limited resources." *I'll show YOU limited bloody resources, wench!* She paused briefly, almost as if she saw the anger briefly flare in my eyes. I breathed deeply, confidently, I calmed myself despite my burning hatred. As my expression returned to one of servitude, she nodded satisfactorily and continued. "You will learn nothing from this line of inquiry."

I was but her servant, a lowly assassin doing her bidding to the best of my ability. She was tired of dealing with my petty questions, tired

of the intrusion of the disgusting and inferior humans into her city. She would tell me nothing that wasn't obviously related to my search... how, then, did the Black Mountain Clan relate to the survivor? "What do you think the dwarf told the survivor?" *Aside from bloody nothing...*

"We cannot be sure obviously, but I assume it has something to do with why the dwarves were banished to the Void. Sadly, Stennar, the dwarf from the blimp, was one of the most skilled engineers. His loss set our timetable back a fair amount."

By the gods! The Void?! Stennar ESCAPED FROM THE VOID?! That's impossible... that's... how can...? I swallowed hard, trying desperately to calm the litany of thoughts suddenly racing through my mind. I was hanging on the precipice of truth, and if I could avoid toppling over the edge for just a moment longer M'in Gorad would unwittingly reveal everything I needed to know. She was so close, I just needed to urge her further without her realizing I was fishing for information. What would a servant say? How would he show his appreciation for the shred of information she'd just revealed? He would praise her, yes... he would flatter her. She desired it, she demanded it, she needed to feel superior. Arrogance was her weakness. "Using Bates in your scheme was a stroke of genius."

She laughed, then, smugly pleased at my subserviant attitude. As long as I knew my place, came to her crawling on my belly instead of as her equal, she would continue to humor me. Only good dogs deserved treats. "After all those years of trying to concoct a plausible excuse to banish a group of dwarves, that young fool stumbles in there and walks away with their cherished technology! Arronax himself couldn't have dreamed up a better scenario."

Arronax?! Son of a bitch, that's what this is all about?! What does Arronax need with a bunch of dwarves...? It all made sense, suddenly... Bates was just a scapegoat. That's why they'd gone to such great lengths to silence him... the warnings from robed figures, the demand for secrecy, and the deaths of all his investigators. These were desperate actions for a dark purpose, but still I needed to know more. "Arronax must have been furious that Stennar escaped." *Yes, that's right... you slipped up, you failed... something went wrong with your grand plan, and Master isn't happy about it at all, is he? How can one so superior as yourself come to terms with that?*

Her laughter died down only slightly at the mention of her failure. She shrugged it off casually, as if it barely concerned her, "What did he expect? He has them constructing a technological gate to weaken the wards so he can re-enter this realm, and he's surprised when one of them escapes through it?"

It's true, then... Arronax really is returning. This is... horrible. This can't be allowed to happen, but what can I possibly do to stop it? No, I alone can't answer that question... I need to get out of here, I need to tell Raven and the Silver Lady. Not just them, but Loghaire, and Bates... the whole world! No... I can't do that, either. I'd cause a panic, or at best be written off as crazy. There will be time to think about all this later, for now I have to get out of here. Gods, how much time do we have left...? "Why hasn't Arronax returned? Stennar made it through."

"Stennar had absolutely no magickal aptitude. He was able to slip through the smallest opening without any danger to himself. If someone of Arronax's magical power were to attempt to come through before the rift was big enough, it would be an excruciating death, to say the least."

At last, it seemed I knew everything. I swallowed hard, losing the grip on the character in my mind as soon as my will weakened. *That's the best I'm going to get, it seems. If I push my luck here, I'm dead.* "I think I have enough information to proceed, now. Good day." I hoped she didn't hear the uncertainty in my voice, or see the trembling in my lips. I gave her but a brief glance, wary of my emotions betraying my hidden truth, and then I departed the chamber.

I didn't hear any footsteps following me out, nor did I feel any magicks being invoked. I'd done it... I'd probed M'in Gorad for the information I needed and escaped without revealing myself. I turned and looked at my companions, taking in their worried and outright angry looks... none of them were any happier about what we'd just learned than I was. As we crossed the bridge off of M'in Gorad's solitary platform I was quite unexpectedly approached by a tall man wearing black, leather armor. "I know who you are," was all he said. He was thin and wiry, his eyes grey and wolfish. He gently fingered a dagger on his belt, obviously impatient.

I was nervous, still off balance from the horrors I'd just learned of,

mentally exhausted from trying so desperately hard to fool everyone despite the growing unease in the pit of my stomach. I wanted to be rid of the man in front of me, and in my haste I decided that ignorance was the best course. "I'm sorry? What are you talking about?"

He laughed, gently pulling the dagger off of his belt. "You wear the amulet of the Molochian Hand and yet you show no respect to your master?"

Damnation! I'm caught! I lapsed for only a second! No, it may not be too late just yet... "Yes, of course, sir. So sorry, sir." It sounded shallow and forced... the persona of the assassin was beyond my grasp... I was too tired to continue my charade.

"Too late for that. Do you think that the Hand doesn't know its own? Or..."

he gives me a pointed look

"... doesn't recognize its quarry?"

I'm not going down without a fight, but I don't want to have to kill every bastard elf on my way out of here. I have a message to deliver and I'll be damned if I'm going to let you stand in my way. "So. You do know who I am. Who are you?" I straightened my back, pulling my own axe off of my belt and staring at the man levelly. If he knew I wasn't his bloody servant than he'd best know I wasn't going to lie down and let him kill me.

He seemed unaffected by my bravado, bowing slightly, keeping his eyes on me as he did so. "I am Gideon Laier, First Blade of the Molochian Hand. I have sought you for a long time. And here you are, having walked into my very arms. Interesting, indeed..."

The initials on all of the orders to kill me had been signed G.L. - Gideon Laier. This was the man that had been seeking my death for many years. *Why?! Why me?! What the bloody hell did I ever do to you? Do you have any idea what you've put me through... what you've cost me?* I kept my voice level, only subtly betraying the anger I felt deeply within my heart. I was a time bomb, slowly ticking, and Gideon had best be careful how he handled me lest I explode.... "Yes, indeed. I'm curious... why do the Molochian Hand want to kill me?"

With the same kind of indifference one might have when choosing what kind of suit to wear to the table for dinner, he answered. "Why else? We are assassins, my friend. We have been contracted to kill you. Is there anything else that need be said?" His attitude was so casual it made me sick. I could never understand how anybody would take the life of another for such a trivial reason. It essentially boiled down to 'because M'in Gorad said to'.

"But why? What did I do?" I doubted he would've accepted such a simple answer if our positions had been reversed. It was so easy to shift the blame off onto others. One never had to take any responsibility or suffer any guilt if they were just following orders. If I was going to die on that bridge, Gideon would know what he'd done... he would know that our battle had nothing to do with M'in Gorad, and everything to do with his casual rejection of morality. "Sadly, you've done nothing at all. The original contract was for a dwarf named Stennar Rock Cutter, who was posing as a gnome when he boarded the IFS Zephyr. You spoke to the dwarf and so involved yourself in his affairs. We have been hunting you ever since..." *Funny how that works... if you hadn't been trying to kill me, I never would've gone through all this in the first place... I might've just gone home... but I didn't, and oh how I have paid... all because of you...* I let my rage seethe beneath the surface, letting the barest edges of it flicker in my voice and my body language. "Why did the Dark Elves want to kill Stennar Rock Cutter...?" It didn't make any sense. What could a single dwarf do? *...I came back to warn...* Bates was wealthy, and respected... if Stennar could convince Bates that Arronax was returning, everybody would believe him.... Gideon spoke, breaking me out of my line of thought.

His voice was firm, hard, and uncaring. He certainly had no sympathy, though that was only natural considering his chosen profession. "That is not important to me. The Hand are assassins. We provide a service which we perform very well, and we are paid for that service upon completion of our contract. Nothing else is important, my friend. The Hand has no conscience or morality. We are death. That death has now come to you...."

I glared at him icily. His words were hollow, though I could not tell as much from merely hearing them. "The Hand hasn't always been

this way..." I studied his reaction carefully, hatefully. *Yes, that's right... I know about you... and I know you're betraying your original purpose. The Hand has refused to serve evil in the past, so why now...?*

He glared back at me, suddenly off balance. "What could you possibly know of the Hand, stranger? We have been assassins for more than 1,000 years. Our record is immaculate, our techniques those of the oldest masters. You don't know us at all..." *That's where you're wrong, Gideon... I DO know you.*

The uncertainty in his voice was becoming more plain; I'd expressed a doubt that had crossed his mind before... quite possibly his one weakness. "I know of the Derian-Ka, Gideon. I know why the Hand left them..."

"What? How could you? You know nothing! A mere scrap of information... an old name... You don't have any idea what you're talking about!"

Looks like I owe you one, Joachim... that book came in handy after all. I do so love books. "Yes, Gideon. I do. First Assassin Trellian wrote it all down. The Hand separated from the Derian-Ka when Trellian discovered how truly evil the men were that they served. There was a great battle on the plains of Vooriden, and both sides lost."

He was silent, then, utterly unsure of himself. At last he spoke, the shame evident in his voice, "So, you do know of your history. You may very well be the only living person, outside of the Hand, who knows these things. That we once served such evil ends is a shame to us..."

Are you saying Joachim is a member of the Hand? Or that he's dead? Either would make sense, but neither seem quite right. Perhaps Joachim is just Joachim. "Why was the Hand so shamed?" I couldn't figure out how working for Kerghan was so much worse than working for Arronax. Destroying the world wasn't exactly prim and proper. "Do you have any idea what sort of a monster that Kerghan the Terrible was? He discovered all of the necromantic arts. He used to experiment on living souls—killing them and then raising them from the dead. The Derian-Ka were his evil progeny and we served them unquestioningly for years. We had never been told of what Kerghan had done..."

I nodded, following along with what I'd already mostly understood. I had with me the very journal that Trellian had uncovered. Frederick would have loved to see such an amazing artifact... "And then your leader, Trellian, found something..."

His face was dark and he stared at the wooden bridge beneath my feet. "Yes... it is said that he found the writings of Kerghan, which described in detail the experiments he used to perform on his victims. It made Trellian sick with revulsion and despair. He vowed to destroy the Derian-Ka, no matter what the cost..."

Finally, it hit me... the shame in Gideon's voice, then, the true revulsion to the amoral acts his order had committed in the past... it all made sense. *By the Gods, he doesn't know! M'in Gorad told me what she's told no hand so far... they've no idea Arronax is involved!* "And yet here you are, making the same mistakes all over again..." I was smug, confident. I very nearly let my axe rest back on my belt, but I wasn't that careless.

Horror shone in Gideon's eyes. He seemed to respect me, perhaps even fear me. "What? What do you mean?" He truly didn't know, and worse yet he knew that he did not know... that he continued with his task anyway was his shame and his alone.

I stared him straight in the eyes, speaking my words carefully and confidently. I wanted him to look back at me and to know, to be absolutely and utterly certain that what I was saying was the ungilded truth. "If you thought Kerghan was bad, how about Arronax?"

"Arronax? What the hell does Arronax have to do with any of this?" I gestured towards the chamber I'd just come from, insinuating where I got the information from. "He's returning. The Dark Elves are involved... in fact, they've been planning it all along. They had the Black Mountain Clan banished so they could build a machine to weaken the wards on the Void, allowing Arronax to return. Stennar escaped, due to his technological aptitude, and... you know the rest."

I could see his fists clenching... he finally knew the true story, and it filled him with shame. "I see... we have been lied to, once again." Anger flared in Gideon's eyes, raw and unbridled hatred. He cast a

dark glance in the direction of M'in Gorad's chamber before looking back at me. "Someone... will answer for this, in due time. And as for you... I am deeply sorry. The Hand will bother you no more."

Can it really be that simple? Just like that... I'm no longer being chased by assassins? "Thank you, Gideon." Although it was only natural for me to be skeptical, I could hear the sincerity in Gideon's voice, see it in the way he looked at me. His order would be given, and his subordinates had no choice but to follow.

"And Vollinger... your mission is complete. You may return to your previous duties..."

"What? Vollinger!" As soon as the words escaped Gideon's mouth the truth hit me like a sucker punch from an ogre. *No... I don't want it to be true. Why, Vollinger... how could you do this to me?* "You're of the Molochean Hand?" It was a pointless question at that point. *Virgil warned me about you right from the beginning, and oh how I should have listened....*

His gaze shifted away from me and he nodded. "Yes. I am an assassin of the Hand." He spoke slowly and quietly, as though this fact now shamed him as well. I couldn't tell if he was ashamed because of what Gideon just said or because of genuine guilt, but no matter how he felt I still felt like I'd been betrayed.

"I don't understand... why didn't you kill me..." *...all the conversations and laughs that we shared... were those just lies? Were you just pretending to be my friend and waiting for the order to finish me off?* I felt so alienated in that moment that I wanted to cry. My small group of friends were the only people left that mattered to me, and it turned out they might not be the people I thought they were. Virgil wouldn't talk to me, Vollinger was an assassin hired to kill me, and who exactly was Sebastian anyway? Accompanying me to T'sen-Ang just because I killed a couple gangs in the Boil? That hardly seemed like a fair trade.

Vollinger sighed, trying to be forward with me instead of lying even more. At the very least I appreciated his honesty. "Gideon is no fool. The Hand has no conscience, it is true, but its leader is wise. From the beginning, we distrusted the Dark Elves. My job was to observe and decide on the best course of action. Our other assassins were

unaware of my presence..."

That's it? That's all you have to say about it? I've considered you a friend for years, and all this time you've just been a spy...? No, the Hand wouldn't squander an opportunity like that. If you'd received the order, you would've killed me. I swallowed uncomfortably, "And if I had not told Gideon of the Dark Elves involvement?" I had to know for sure, no matter how badly the truth hurt, I simply had to know. Even I didn't have anything on Vollinger when it came to stabbing people in the back.

"Had we not come here, and had you not convinced Gideon of the error of our ways, I would have killed you. Such was my assignment, regardless of my...uh...personal opinions..."

Hmph... personal opinions... so that means you're fond of me, but that wouldn't have stopped you from killing me anyway? "I'll take that as a compliment." How can you think like that, how can you live like that? Gods, I wish I could so easily ignore my conscience... Frederick, Nathaniel... I sighed deeply, putting my memories aside for the time being. I was still in the middle of the nest of my enemies, and betrayal or not I had to keep my wits about me. *Vollinger, why...?* "Thanks for your help, Vollinger..." Acting came naturally to me at that point, and if I could act the part of an assassin I could surely act resolute even when feelings of doubt nearly overwhelmed me.

Vollinger looked up at me with a faint smile, and just a hint of sadness in his eyes. "Of course." Then he turned to address Gideon, "Sir, I was wondering... if I don't have a new assignment, do you think there might be a possibility...?" *You've got to be kidding me... you really expect me to-?*

Gideon finished Vollinger's thought for him. "...if you might be permitted to journey on with our friend, here? I was thinking that very thing myself. Yes... you may stay with her as long as she deems necessary. It is the least the Hand can do for the trouble it has caused."

Tears burned behind my eyes, but I held them back. *How can you ask that of me?! How can you demand to stay with me even after concealing this lie from me for all these years?! Dammit, Vollinger, why?! Why did you have to be an assassin?! I sighed again, breathing calmly in hopes*

that it would calm the rest of me. I'd only just found out about the Black Mountain Clan, and Arronax... and Frederick's death still seemed like yesterday to me. Now Vollinger besides? I couldn't take it. It was too much for me in too short a period of time. *I can always think on this later... I don't have to turn Vollinger loose right here in the middle of T'sen-Ang. He can help me escape, and then after that...* I looked at Gideon to say my goodbye, "Thank you. I suppose I'd better be on my way."

"Good luck to you... we won't be seeing each other again."

He looks around furtively.

"I recommend you leave here as soon as you're done with your business..."

My mind still raced with dozens of thoughts, but I once again started to calm, started to focus on my purpose for remaining. *You don't have to tell me twice.* "Good bye, Gideon." He turned around and walked back off of the bridge, disappearing down the nearby staircase leading to the ground. I had only one remaining thing to take care of before I, too, could leave... I'd made myself a promise and I fully intended to keep it. *No more threats, no more fear, no more death... you will pay for your crimes, all of you....* I looked around T'sen-Ang carefully, intent on finding something I could use against the elves to throw the city into disarray and destruction. I found half ogres.

Chapter the Fifty Third:

Shadows of the Past, Part Two

"Hi lady!" One of them called out to me cheerily as I passed. *Now here's a group that might be dumb enough to go on a rampage here, and I can even escape scot free... the only difficulty is convincing them, but they're half ogres... how hard can it be?*

I suspected they were probably too dumb to realize they were slaves. "Hello. Who are you? What are you doing here?"

He frowned, "Me is Maug. Slave here." *Well, I guess he does realize it... maybe it's just difficult for half ogres to express any emotion besides 'happy'.* I wasn't really being fair. The half ogres were only stupid because nobody bothered to educate them, Ogdin was proof that they could be intelligent when taught. I idly wondered if the same could be said for orcs.

The keeper that stood next to the ogres shouted out at them, "Worthless slags! I don't know why we allow you to live..." *I have to wonder if his only job is brutalizing and insulting this poor bunch here. Can't have a proper group of slaves without putting them in their place, now, can we? Ugh.*

It didn't make sense, though. Ogres were dumb, but that would only make them even more prone to violence. They generally didn't respect threats, and I hardly suspected they were afraid of the dark elves... ignorance breeds confidence. I lowered my voice to a whisper. "So is that why you allow this insulting creature to treat you badly?" The half ogre whispered back to me.

"Worthless slags! I don't know why we allow you to live..."
Looking extremely frustrated.

"Want to kill. Want to kill much. Hate elves... all these here. Very bad to us! No can fight. Big spell. Big magick malice, no fight. No can

fight with elves. Makes much pain. Much pain!"

I suppose that makes sense, then... looks like convincing these fellows is going to be easier than I thought, I just have to break the spell. Yes... I can feel the magick in the air now that I'm paying attention... it is a rather potent spell... An idea started forming in my head as I chatted with the fellow. It looked like we stood to help each other out quite a bit indeed. "Big spell? Someone is holding you through magick? Who?"

It actually surprised me that the half ogre could even pronounce the mage's name, but that was only further proof that they were just uneducated and not actually stupid. "T'val N'or. Dark mage. Very strong. Me hate much! Want him dead! Want crush bones in hands... make Maug happy! But Maug no be happy... can do nothing!"

I want Maug crush bones, too. "There is no way to break this spell?" Maug actually knew quite a bit for an ogre, and it almost surprised me that I was asking him such pointed questions... but as long as I kept getting answers I supposed it was the shortest way. It sure beat wandering around T'sen-Ang and taking an axe to anything that resonated as magickal. By the time I escaped I would hardly have an axe left.

The keeper started shouting again, continuing to insult the poor things. Maug snorted in disgust. "Yes. Can Stop magick... Must kill T'val N'or. Must do thing Maug want to, but no can do. Make Maug more angry." *Yes, anger is good... anger is healthy. You be as angry as you want, Maug.*

I raised an eyebrow curiously, "You have to kill him? ...or can anyone kill him?" I was hoping the spell wasn't one of those tricky ones that was nigh impossible to break. I might've stood a chance if I'd come more prepared, but I couldn't just tinker up a magick breaking device without the spare parts.

Maug scratched his head a bit, thinking it over. "No need be me... He just need die, then spell broke, Maug fight again." It suddenly occurred to him what I'd been thinking. "You kill T'val N'or for Maug?" *Yeeesss... it's starting to make sense now, isn't it? I kill T'val N'or, you kill the rest of the elves...*

"Perhaps..." I didn't feel right leading the poor thing on, but one could never be too careful when dealing with half ogres. I felt awful, but T'sen-Ang was no place to start acting soft-hearted. "What would you do if I did?" *Just do what comes natural... don't run away, please...*

"I've stepped in something foul... I'll kill all the bad elves here. Crush heads. Get over here and lick my boots clean! One by one. Maug have fun! Maug love to tear them in pieces! Lugg, Thrall... they want to kill them too."

Motions towards taunting elf.

"This one die first... you make Thrall not die?"

I nodded, "I will see what I can do...." I said it suggestively, indicating that I liked his response. He seemed to get the hint and he smiled dumbly. I didn't particularly want to see the aftermath of what Maug's keeper had just demanded of him, so I wandered off in search of the mage I was supposed to kill.

I took slow, casual steps and focused on the magick around me... feeling it rub up against my skin, feeling the itch and burn as it caressed me, then as quickly as it had come it was pushed away again; I was certainly no friend to magick. I wandered around various wooden platforms, growing more and more disgusted as I crossed over each one. T'sen-Ang was certainly no place for the faint of heart. At last, on the far side of one of the platforms, I set my eyes upon a dark elven mage that made my skin itch quite unpleasantly. *You... you are the one that must die... and in killing you, your race will pay... oh yes, Dark Elves, your reign is over.*

I wandered over towards him, sizing him up as I neared. He was scrawny and his attention was obviously split between watching me and some other activity that took a great degree of concentration. I caressed the handle of my axe, gazing around the platform quickly to make sure nobody else was near. T'val N'or seemed to be all alone in his room and the rest of the platform was empty... it was just us... me, my companions, and the soon-to-be-dead mage. He spat at me when I stood in front of him. "I do not know you human, nor do I care to."

"I know you, T'val N'or." His eyes seemed very suddenly nervous. "...but I don't care to." My axe was off of my belt in seconds. T'val N'or's eyes widened in shock and he stood paralyzed, unable to react

to the horror that was about to befall him. I jabbed him in the abdomen with the handle of my axe, causing him to grunt and double over in pain. I slipped behind him during that momentary distraction, bringing down the blade of my axe with frightening precision. His shoulder separated from his body, nearly exploding in bloody chunks that splattered against the walls of his tiny room. His body fell to the ground with a thud, and the itching in my skin rapidly began to fade.

It was as close to satisfying as killing anybody ever had been. It still felt distasteful, even though he was a cruel old bastard and I knew I was doing the world a favor by removing him from it. I could never be an assassin... *I could never be like Vollinger...* At the very least it was done, and I only had to make sure Maug was living up to his end of the bargain before I could finally leave the hellish place.

I heard a loud scream, shrill and girlish, coming from the direction the ogres were in. I suspected that Maug hadn't taken long at all to realize what I'd done. The horrible sounds continued and I heard a wet crunch as I stepped onto the ogre's platform. The sight that I saw upon rounding to the other side it only confirmed my suspicion: the elf that had been taunting Maug was lying in a broken heap on the rotten wood. I couldn't honestly say I felt the least bit sorry for him, though I was glad I didn't have to be the one to deliver retribution.

Maug grinned happily at me as I approached. "Me see you again, lady! Hi again!" He was really quite cheery compared to the grim scenery around him, his attitude a stark contrast from the blood dripping off his fists. I wondered momentarily if he connected the breaking of the spell with our earlier conversation, and just as quickly felt badly for simply expecting sheer stupidity in dealing with him.

I didn't care to stick around any longer than I had to, nor did I want to hold Maug back from the beatings he so desperately wanted to give, so I spoke quite directly. "I have killed T'val N'or for you, Maug." I said it in such a way that even he had to know I expected him to fulfill his end of the bargain in return. The happy look on his face suggested he knew just what I meant. He took off immediately, shouting to me as he crossed the wooden bridge to the next platform. "You, uh, are a strong woman! Make me happy; Thrall and Lugg

happy too. Thank you much. We make sure all bad elves dead now. Bye-bye."

Good luck, fellow... good luck. It was about the best I could have done to make good on my earlier promise. Between the rampaging destruction caused by the ogres and the inevitable backlash from Gideon's betrayal, the Dark Elves certainly wouldn't be bothering anybody for quite a long time to come. *It's done... I'm finally done... T'sen-Ang is ruined, just like I promised...* I knew it didn't make up for the deaths they caused, but I felt, of all things, pride at having done the world a service.

I very nearly ran down the staircase leading out of T'sen-Ang, panic welling up in my throat at last as I let my legs carry me as quickly as they could manage. I pulled my axe off of my belt, prepared to kill the guard outside if I had to. It was probably for the best that he seemed blissfully unaware of the horrors going on just upstairs. The sheer height and size of the platforms and the twisted cover of the trees shrouded the snaps and screams in a comfortable silence. Just as the five of us made our escape, passing by the campfire in front of the entrance, Virgil stopped me suddenly. His voice was unsteady and nervous, but held a certain urgency. Something was truly distressing him, I only hoped it wasn't me. "Excuse me. I... uh, I have something I need to talk with you about..."

"Yes, Virgil? What is it?" *Are you ready so share your past with me...? Even in a place like this? What's gotten into you, Virgil? No... it doesn't matter, I'm willing to hear whatever you have to say, whenever... I don't want to be distant from you, Virgil. Please, tell me... talk to me....* "I have to leave. There's something I need to do.... something I should have done a long time ago....."

What...? No! I'm not just going to let you walk away! I won't lose you, too! "What are you talking about Virgil?" I urged him, the pleading obvious in my voice. I stepped closer to him, trying to grab his hand within mine, but he pulled it away and refused to look at me. *Don't do this to me, Virgil, not now... not ever... but especially not now! No, I'm so stupid and selfish... this isn't just about me... something is bothering you, and I want to help you.*

He shook his head, unwavering. "Listen, I... I'm sorry things have to be this way. I stayed with you as long as I could, I tried to forget...

but it burns within me, won't leave me alone. I... I have to go to Caladon. If I can, I'll return to you. If not, well... well I wish you the best of luck..."

I lost all of my composure and shouted at him desperately, "Virgil, please... just tell me! Let me help!" *You can't do this, you can't just leave me alone... I've already lost Frederick, don't you leave me, too!* I felt so selfish for being more concerned about what he meant to me than about his problems. I felt guilty, like perhaps I truly didn't deserve his trust... perhaps it was my fault that he was running away without me.

I could hear a sigh from inside his helmet and I thought he sounded close to tears. It seemed almost like it wasn't any easier for him to leave me than it was for me to let him leave. I wanted so badly for him to change his mind, to share his burden with me and to help him like he'd been helping me. I made to get closer to him once again, but he stepped backwards. "I'm... I'm sorry. I have no choice... I can no longer live with it. I must go and do what must be done. Farewell, Living One..." Tears sprung from my eyes. *What...? How dare you! Don't you dare call me that! I'm Samantha, and we're friends! We're... we're bloody friends... I don't want to be worshipped... why won't you just be my friend, Virgil...?*

He ran off into the distance without even stopping to look back. "No, Virgil! Stop! Don't leave me!" I screamed. I ran after him, but in my haste I tripped over the hem of my dress. "Virgil, wait!" I had no idea whether or not he heard my cry, but it broke my heart to see him running off into the distance. I tried scrambling to my feet, but my hand slipped in the dark mud and I fell face-first into the dirt. I looked up, watching Virgil fade off into the distance. Just as quickly as he'd arrived when I first met him amidst the wreckage of the I.F.S. Zephyr so long ago, he was gone. Sebastian held his hand out to me and helped me up off of the ground. I muttered a shaky, "thanks" and I took off again, running after Virgil.

I won't let you go, I won't let this happen... I ran and I ran until my lungs burned, but no matter how far I went or how fast, I could see no sign of Virgil. It was so dark that I couldn't even hope to make out any footprints he might've been leaving, and I had no idea which direction he ran off in. I collapsed onto the ground and began to cry.

How could you do this to me, Virgil...?



I sat there crying until the others caught up with me and made an impromptu camp for the night. Terry curled up next to me and I pet him, somehow soothing the wounds that remained in my heart, if only a little bit. In the morning we made for Qintarra. Ultimately, I wanted to reach Caladon, and the sooner the better, but before I could allow myself to go chasing after Virgil I had a message to deliver. *I won't just let you go, Virgil... I will find you. If anybody in all of Arcanum can find you, it's me.*

The elves welcomed me into Qintarra openly, and I was pleased that they no longer felt the need to threaten me. I knew not if it was my assistance with the Bedokaan or the loggers at Falcon's Ache, perhaps even word handed down from Raven herself, but it was a comforting gesture. I needed all the comforts I could get at that moment.

Despite the feeling of slight discomfort on my skin I was a whole lot happier to be in Qintarra instead of T'sen-Ang. The trees were bright and vibrant, splaying outwards into the sky and soaking up the light. I could see the forest clearly in every direction, and in the far distance I could swear I even saw the western coast. I basked in the warmth and light that Qintarra offered me, enjoying the sheer serenity after such a harrowing experience.

As I wandered from one platform to the next I passed by Swyft, smirking at her presence. *So, Tarant wasn't all you thought it would be after all, was it? Come home back to the safety of Qintarra?* I held her no ill will, if anything I was amused. Such were the vagaries of youth.

Raven was in the middle of a conversation with an elf I didn't recognize, so I let her be for the moment. I certainly wasn't just going

to dash up to them and start babbling about Dark Elves and Arronax. I passed the time by making a brief visit over to Whysper, handing her the bag of random wisp essences that I'd been carrying around for far too long. "I gathered all kinds of wisp essences for you. Did I manage to find a Vol'ar's essence?"

She opened the bag and shifted around the contents slightly, picking through them carefully. After only a few short moments she looked up at me with a smile.

"You did! Splendid! Here is..."

She hands me a weathered scroll.

I was going to give this scroll to Virgil... no, there's no 'was', I will give it to him just as soon as I track him down. He'd better have a damned good excuse when I find him because I'm really going to give him a piece of my mind. Oh, who am I kidding? I just want him back.... "Thank you, Whysper, goodbye." I stuffed the scroll in my purse hastily and walked off. My thoughts remained on Virgil for reasons I couldn't really fathom. I thought it was only normal to fixate on his absence when we'd spent so much time together over the past years. It sure did make me feel lonely, though.

I wandered back towards Raven, noting that her previous conversation was finished. She gazed at me steadily as I approached, making it impossible to tell what she was thinking or feeling. *As cold as ever, I see... you've really got to work on those horrible manners of yours.* It looked as though she hated me, but I suspected she simply looked at everybody like that. Her voice was firm, yet at the same time gentle. She still held that softness that suggested she was at least a little bit fond of me. "Ah yes. You again. How can I help you?"

Well, no sense beating around the bush. The sooner I get to the point the sooner I can track Virgil down. "I bring information about the village of the Dark Elves..." Now where could Virgil be...? The newspaper article on his brother mentioned the Caladon Crime Ring operated out of the Sobbing Onion. I seem to remember that's where Mr. Razzia can be found as well, perhaps I ought to ask him a few questions...

Raven spoke again, snapping me out of it. Although she held her composure quite well, there was just a slight twinge of excitement in the back of her voice and I could tell she was rather excited to hear

what I had to say. "I'm so very glad you've returned to us. Did you find the village of the Dark Elves? What has happened since you left us?"

Yes, yes... calm down... I fully intend on sharing what I found. I kept things as brief as possible since I was in a hurry. "After I left here last I traveled to Tarant. I learned that Mr. Terwilliger had printed a book," I gave Raven an odd look as I thought back to the book's introduction, "but tracking it down wasn't easy. So as not to bore you with the details I will say that many people died at the hands of the Dark Elves, but in the end I was able to track the book down and learn the location of T'sen-Ang. I traveled there and met with M'in Gorad, posing as an assassin in her employ. She told me something... something horrifying...."

"So... Min Gorad is a woman."

The look in Raven's eyes was a furious and hateful one. Her expression was startlingly malevolent, communicating more in that single glance than an entire speech ever would have. "I hope you get the chance..." I grinned wickedly, thinking of the kind of pain that M'in Gorad would suffer if Raven ever got ahold of her. Of all the words I might ever use to describe Raven, gentle was not one of them.

She nodded at me, a sinister grin slowly forming on her face, "So do I, so do I..." She tossed the idea about in her head for several moments, perhaps living out the idea in her mind. Eventually her eyes came back to me and she continued our conversation, "...and what did you find out from this M'in Gorad?"

You're really not going to like this any better than I do, but you need to know... "She'd been waiting for years for an excuse to banish a group of dwarves to the Void when Bates stumbled along, fulfilling her every dream by getting ahold of the dwarven steam engine. She pretended to be an emissary from the Silver Lady and threatened the Wheel Clan with war if they did not comply and hand over the dwarves. Regrettably, Loghaire, King of Dwarves, complied... and so it was done. The Black Mountain Clan was banished to the Void, and even now they are forced to work on a machine that will weaken the wards of the Void and enable Arronax to return."

Raven stared off into the distance for a long time, pensive. She was more than a little surprised at what I'd said and I certainly couldn't blame her. If I'd had the luxury of losing myself in my own thoughts when I learned of the information in the first place, I surely would have. "So... the Black Mountain Clan was banished in order to help Arronax weaken the wards. He's really coming back. We elves are a magickal race, and wise in the ways of rune and prophecy, but I never really thought... Regardless, we must act. You must speak to my mother... she may be able to see what is to be done."

Oh, just bloody great. Why can't you speak to her? She really creeps me out, and makes my skin hurt. I'm not going to understand one damn bit of what she says anyway. For all my internal whining, I knew what had to be done. "I'll do just that, Raven. I will return shortly." Raven nodded and I hesitantly stepped inside of the Silver Lady's chamber. My skin didn't seem to be nearly so irritated in her presence this time, and I was quite extremely pleased about that fact. I itched quite badly, and my skin did even burn a bit, but it wasn't as horribly unbearable as it had been previously. "Greetings, Silver Lady." "Yes... I knew you'd return to me. And it seems that you still walk the shore... this gladdens me..."

"Why?" The question flew off of my lips almost before I could think to say it in the first place. It was an awful strange thing to ask, but then again the Silver Lady wasn't exactly normal herself. I supposed I didn't really see why such a powerful and revered individual should care one whit about somebody as insignificant as me. What did it matter to her if I lived or died? Wasn't I just playing the role given to me?

She didn't even look in my direction. That haunting voice of hers just spilled forth as always, drowning the entire chamber in its otherworldly echo. "It means that you've chosen the right path, traveler. At least, right in the way that YOU see things. I am happy for you..." The things she said surely didn't get any less strange as time went on.

Happy for me? I'm glad one of us is happy, I suppose, but you've chosen an awful odd reason to be happy. I've lost Frederick, and now Virgil as well... no, I have not chosen the path that I feel is the right one. I have little to be happy about. I tried brushing it off, just ignoring the

unusual comments she made. Her feelings weren't any of my business anyway, and I ought to have at least been glad she wished me well... even if she didn't seem to understand what was truly in my heart. "I've come to ask you what I am to do next. Please, try to be clear..."

In response there was only silence. She wasn't moving at all, simply floating on the other side of the room. I waited patiently for several minutes, the silence in the room slowly growing to bother me. Finally, when I could stand it no longer, I spoke, "Silver Lady?" Still, there was no response... no movement... simply... nothing. *She isn't... dead, is she?* "Ahem..." I cleared my throat. She suddenly gasped, breathing in very deeply, and then she spoke to me.

"Your answer lies with Nasrudin."

"What? How is that possible?" *You've got to be kidding me. I think I preferred it when you were talking about fire and shadow, because I CAN'T TALK WITH A BLOODY CORPSE! Wait... this has to be another damned riddle. So am I the Living One and you're telling me that only I can decide what to do next? ...or perhaps... my answer 'lies' with Nasrudin, in his grave? Is there something important buried with his remains?*

I could hear the musical laughter in her voice once again, teasing me, a gentle flute carrying a tune off into the wind. "You have your answer, traveler." Her voice faded to a whisper then, I had to strain to be able to make it out at all, "We won't be speaking again..." If it were coming from anybody else I would've felt threatened or insulted, but she meant it and it chilled me to the bone.

I shuddered and darted out of the chamber in my momentary discomfort. *By the Gods that woman really knows how to frighten somebody.* I supposed that it would be best to seek Raven's counsel on the Silver Lady's cryptic riddles, even if she was on some level more straightforward this time. For all I knew Nasrudin was a symbol that meant the leader of the elves, and since Raven ran the daily affairs I had to talk with her. *Bloody mad- how the hell does anybody get any useful information out of her anyway?* Raven glanced up at me questioningly as I approached. Without hesitation, I answered, just foolishly blurting out what was on my mind without regard to how exactly I said it. "She told me that my answer lies with Nasrudin..." "That's very, very odd...."

Oh good, so you mean to say it makes as little sense to you as it does to me. I was actually quite amused at just how much that confused Raven, although my amusement quickly shifted to one of personal horror when I realized it could be far worse than I was imagining it to be. What if she really did want me to go digging up Nasrudin's remains? Living One or no, I couldn't imagine the Panarii would be willing to just sit by idly while I desecrated the remains of their god. "Why?" *Please, tell me I'm not right...*

She gave me a hard stare and explained it to me as though I was a child. I resented the attitude, mostly because I suspected if she were in my shoes her questions wouldn't be any different. Besides, her mother was simply impossible to deal with... or understand. "Because Nasrudin has been dead for more than 2,000 years."

Tell me something I don't know. "Wait, you don't mean to tell me it's literal? I actually have to find Nasrudin? How the bloody hell am I going to do that? I'm not going to go traipsing about the lands of the dead to speak with the ghost of an ancient elf." *Can you please tell me something that might actually help instead of just repeating the obvious? Damn, you really take after your mother sometimes...*

"Yes, it is very strange. My recommendation is that you travel to Caladon. There you will find the First Temple of the Panarii and perhaps some more answers....."

Gods, I was right the first time, wasn't I? Son of a bitch. I didn't suspect that the Panarii would be able to help me much, either, but I wanted to head to Caladon anyway. "I'll do that, Raven. Thank you so much for your help." I began walking away from Raven quickly, finally allowing my mind to turn towards the coming search. *I'm on my way, Virgil... dammit, I swear I will find you. I will not make the same mistake twice.* For the moment, I didn't even care about the Panarii, the elves, or bloody Arronax. I'd delivered my message, and the elves could either make preparations themselves or they could bloody wait until I'd tracked Virgil down... even if it took me years.

Raven nodded towards me as I left, "Good luck, Samantha. I hope this turns out well... for all of us..." *It's no longer my concern, Raven... at least not until I find Virgil. I'm done with all of this nonsense, I've got to start thinking about those close to me.* I stalked off, not even bothering to stay the night. Qintarra wasn't as comfortable as the surrounding

woodlands anyway. I still had memories of the horrible pains in my back following my night on the wooden bench.

As I traveled down the staircase towards the forest floor I thought of the quickest way for me to reach Caladon. A ship from Tarant would be far faster than overland travel, although Tarant wasn't exactly nearby either. Still, it was my best bet. I made for Hardin's Pass, planning to head from there towards Stillwater. *This is an awfully long distance to travel with Vollinger still in tow, but... I can't just tell him off yet. If he can help me get Virgil back even a day sooner, then I welcome his help... for now.*

Hardin's pass was as harsh and forgiving as ever, but I refused to slow down. I traveled onward at a maddening pace, feeling the muscles in my legs begin to burn from trudging through the snow so hastily. "Hey, hey, what's the rush? Can't we slow down?" Sebastian was obviously getting tired as well. *If I have to leave you behind, Sebastian, I'll do it... I'm sorry, but Virgil means more to me...*

I gave him a resolute stare, "Sorry, Sebastian, but if you don't like it then you can leave when we get to Stillwater. I simply have to get to Caladon... I have to find Virgil. I don't care what he says, I won't give up on him... I won't let him just leave!" All of my rage and frustration came flying out at once, and Sebastian was the unfortunate recipient. I felt a bit guilty for blowing up at him, especially since he wasn't the reason I was so upset. I just couldn't handle everything happening all at once.

He held his hands up by his chest, waving me off defensively, "Whoa, hey, easy there! Then we'll make double time, okay? I'm with you, let's track Virgil down as soon as we can. I sure hope we'll have time to rest in Caladon after, though... whew." He chuckled half-heartedly, trying to shake off the tongue-lashing I'd just unleashed upon him.

"I... all right, Sebastian. I'm sorry. We can rest in Caladon, until then let's get a move on." I pressed my pace even harder, ignoring the burning in my legs until some combination of the cold and the strain of overworking them finally numbed the pain at last. I knew I would end up paying for that the moment I sat down to rest, but it didn't matter... nothing would match the pain I felt at Virgil's absence.

We arrived in Stillwater late one evening, unfortunately too late to continue our journey any more that night. There was diligent and then there was suicidal, and trekking about the snowy plains around Stillwater under the cover of darkness leaned far closer to the latter. I refused to make the night a complete waste, however. I headed to the pub, for once not even ordering a single shot of whiskey... even if that was the one time it really would've made me feel better. I slapped a few coins on the bar and looked the bartender in the eye, "Anybody in this town have a boat? I'm in a hurry to get to Tarant."

He pocketed the coins happily. Bartenders were always happy to accept tips in exchange for the local gossip. Usually there was alcohol involved, but they were all too happy when there wasn't, "You'll want to be speaking with Daniel Porter. He's the one nursing an ale over in the corner there." The bartender pointed at a fairly well dressed man, seemingly well-to-do for a denizen of Stillwater. It was a relative term, however, since at times having enough coins to buy a second drink could be considered well-to-do in that backwater town.

"Give me one of what he's having, then." I tossed the bartender a couple more coins and took the offered ale in return. I boldly strode over towards Daniel's table, but he didn't notice me approaching. I sat down across from him and slid the ale over to him slowly and purposefully. He seemed curious, but more than willing to tolerate the company of a lady offering him more alcohol. I ignored any potentially strange impressions I might be leaving, not caring one damn bit what Stillwater folk thought of me anyhow. "You're taking me to Tarant on your boat starting tomorrow morning. How much do I have to pay you for this service?" It was brazen, surely, but it wasn't a negotiation. I'd steal his damned boat if I had to.

He finished draining his mug of ale and then started in on the mug I brought him. He drank it slowly and yet still he was already half finished by the time he'd concocted a response. I simply sat there watching him drink it, refusing to leave. With a sigh he finally said, "I suppose I have to go down that way anyway. Say 300 coin?"

I counted out several coins from my purse and handed them to him, "I'll make it 600, and you'll get me there as quickly as you can." My

normal prudence when it came to parting with coin was tossed completely aside in my desperation to find Virgil. I'd spend 600 coins, I'd spend 6,000... if only it would bring me Virgil back.

He took the coins happily, "Now that is something that I can do." He was fairly quiet and shy, although I imagined that had a lot to do with the way I looked. If I were in his shoes, I would've been afraid to refuse. I didn't mind leaving that impression one bit, at least I was paying him reasonably for his services. He surely did love his ale, though.

We left early in the morning, at my insistence, traveling to the nearby branch of the river. Normally it would've been a two-day journey but if I was paying 600 coin I was damn well going to set the pace. Daniel stayed quiet, not wanting to anger me, and we reached the river in just under a day's time. From there it took only a few more days before we reached Tarant.

I bid Daniel goodbye, tossing him another 100 coins as a tip for the speedy travel, and I immediately wandered onto a nearby ship. There was no time to waste, no time to stop for even a quick rest. I looked at Sebastian and the look he gave me in return suggested he understood perfectly. I looked at Vollinger, too, though he could see the pain and distance in my eyes and he merely looked at the ground. *Is he actually upset...?*

I tossed the ship captain 500 coins, "The going rate for passage to Caladon is 500 coins. I've given you that, and I've got 1,000 more. Each day that passes that amount will reduce by 100 coins. When we arrive in Caladon you'll get whatever's left."

He heard the tone in my voice and saw the serious look in my eyes. "Yes, ma'am. Weigh anchor!" Most ships took nearly two weeks to reach Caladon. I reached it in only 6 days. I tossed the captain his 400 coin tip and strolled onto the streets of Caladon early in the evening. *I'm back again... but nothing is left for me here except Virgil. Where are you, Virgil? What have you been doing since you left me?* My first stop was the Sobbing Onion.

I wandered into the back room of the place, keeping an eye out for

shady individuals. I was willing to shake information out of anybody I could get my hands on, and if I had to get nasty about it I was going to. The paper had mentioned that Lawrence's murder might be connected to the crime ring, and that was the best place to begin my search. I looked around the room carefully, noting the trap door in the corner. *That must be the shady basement where they make all of their underhanded dealings.* I overheard one of the nearby men speak the name 'Razzia'. *Ah, it looks as though I've wandered in at an excellent time... you're the same man that made Stennar's passport... and you're bound to have a connection to the crime ring.* I walked up to him boldly, "I have some questions about a passport you made." I let my hand drift near to my axe, prepared to use it in any way I had to in extracting the information I needed.

He cleared his throat and stared at me nervously, eyeing up my axe as sweat began forming on his brow, "I do not know what you are talking about. I do not 'make' passports... that is against the law, madam." I could hear the trembling in his voice and I knew he was lying. I would've known even if I weren't carrying Stennar's passport with me.

I'm in no mood to argue. I pulled the passport out of my purse and showed it to him, "Mr. Preston Radcliffe begs to differ." More eyes in the room turned towards him and I secretly delighted in the unwanted attention I was drawing to the man.

Looking shocked and slightly afraid.

"Where did you get that?"

It seemed I was finally getting somewhere with the fellow. "Off a body near the IFS Zephyr. I need some information about him." As I spoke I could see him start backing away unconsciously, running into the corner of the nearby pool table. *What is it you're so afraid of? I know I'm not THAT intimidating... I'm a woman for heaven's sake!*

His fear was thick and tangible... he was wary of me to the point of being almost terrified. "Who was this man, anyhow? You are not the only person who has been asking questions..." The tone in his voice was accusatory and he nearly shouted at me. One would think I'd just asked him about a murder he'd committed only hours prior.

I wondered briefly if the other person he mentioned might've been

Virgil, but it didn't strike me as the kind of thing he came to Caladon to investigate. No, Virgil's purpose was much more personal... if he'd wanted to investigate Stennar he never would've left me. *Virgil... what is it... where are you?* "Who else has been here?"

He shook his head uncomfortably, "A couple of thugs came by right after the Zephyr left Caladon. They wanted information about him. When I refused to talk, they decided I needed a little encouragement." The pain in the man's eyes was evident, even these several years later. Whatever they'd done to him had stuck with him for a very long time, as vivid now as it had been at the moment it was happening. No wonder he was afraid, so willing to talk at the show of a single passport. It must have been quite horrible indeed. "I do not know who they were..." He shook his head nervously, silently praying that what he said would be enough to satisfy me.

I see... that must have been the Molocheans, hot on Stennar's trail. So that's how they tracked him down, that's why they went after the zepplin... Gods, the gnome in Shrouded Hills knew to use the name Radcliffe. "What did you tell them?"

"I told them that I had made him a passport... that he had chosen Preston Radcliffe as his name, a gnome from Tarant. I also informed them that they were too late... he had just departed on the Zephyr and there was nothing they could do about it... or so I had thought..." Deep in my heart I hated the man I was speaking to, but I couldn't bring myself to hurt him. If it hadn't been for him the I.F.S. Zephyr would never have crashed, everybody on it would still be alive. ...*and Frederick never would have died...* "What did they do?" I remained calm, despite my growing anger. No matter how much I wanted to blame the man in front of me, it wasn't really his fault.

He winced again, remembering vividly the torture he suffered at the hands of the Molocheans. Truly, I was surprised he even lived the experience. He must've been quite valuable to them. "They were 'insistent' that I give them information on how to get to the Zephyr. I laughed bitterly and told them they were out of their minds... Crazy old Maxim had built the Zephyr in his factory outside of town, and it was a one of a kind beast..."

Everything was beginning to make sense. *So that's how... the flying*

machines... bloody hell, it all came down to you! "You told them where the factory was?"

He shook his head shamefully, "I thought nothing of it. Everyone knew where Maxim's factory was... it was that very night that it was burnt to the ground. That is all I know." *You put it all right in their laps... told them everything they needed to know. Gods, so many have suffered and died... and you've no idea what you caused...* I tried to change my line of thinking, tried to forgive the man for his weakness. His pain was evident, and I didn't care to think about just how brutal the Molocheans could get in their coercion.

Dwelling on the zeppelin crash wasn't getting me any closer to finding Virgil anyhow. I shifted the topic of conversation, focusing more on what I'd come to find out in the first place. This Razzia was definitely the same as the one I knew to be a member of the crime ring, and he had to have some clue as to Virgil's whereabouts. "Where does that trap door in the corner lead?"

Once again a look of discomfort crossed his face and he glared at me. I was lucky that he was afraid of me or I suspected he would've attacked me outright. He was lucky for his fear, too, for I had no compunctions about cutting him down where he stood. "Y-you don't want to go down there right now-" His speech was cut off by the sound of gunfire from below and I heard a horrible scream. I pushed Mr. Razzia out of the way and dove for the trap door.

I saw Virgil standing in the middle of three men, with a fourth dead on the ground behind him. He had his axe out and he was fighting for his life. *I've found you...!* The half ogre's blade landed solidly against Virgil's shoulder and he grunted. I ran forward in a panic, "Virgil! Virgil, no!" The gnome fired a gun from point blank range, blood spilling out from behind Virgil's armor. "By the Gods, Virgil, RUN! I'll help you!" I continued running forward as fast as I could.

Virgil's axe came down upon the half ogre brutally in response, slicing clear through the beast's shoulder and all the way down to his waist. Blood splattered all over the ground and on Virgil's armor. I could see splinters of the half ogre's rib cage from inside of his chest cavity and I almost gagged. I kept running forward as fast as my feet

would carry me, but it seemed like that basement went on for an eternity.

The gnome fired a second shot as Virgil ran towards him and I saw Virgil stumble, then fall backwards. The other remaining man stepped behind Virgil, shoving a blade down between the cracks of the armor at the shoulder. "Stop! Stop hurting Virgil, damn you!" I continued screaming as I ran forward, watching everything in front of me happen in slow motion. I was just an observer, irrelevant to the action at hand. My cries were neither heard nor heeded. "You'll kill him! Stop!"

Please be all right, please be all right... you're tougher than that, right Virgil? Come on, get up...! I continued running forward, but in my extreme haste I tripped again on the hem of my dress, just as I had in the forest around T'sen-Ang. The gnome continued firing his gun as Virgil lay there helplessly. It wasn't just a fight, it was a bloody execution. I pulled myself to my feet as quickly as possible and continued my dash towards Virgil, desperately wanting to help him.

The other man shoved his blade into even more cracks in Virgil's armor, each time coming out with fresh blood on it. Virgil no longer seemed to be moving. *No, by the gods no... he's going to be all right, he has to be all right!* As I finally drew near to them I suddenly spied the thick pool of blood staining the ground beneath Virgil's body. The gnome turned away and leveled his gun at me, firing once and missing.

I pulled my axe off of my belt and screamed, "YOU BASTARDS! STOP IT! LEAVE VIRGIL ALONE!" The gnome fired his gun yet again, but I dodged out of the way quite easily. I was trained and practiced. I'd killed hundreds, everything from dragons to powerful wizards. I was the master of close combat. These men were thugs, only able to take down Virgil through sheer force of numbers. *Virgil... no... no, you can't die!*

Time stood nearly still and I was behind the gnome faster than he could even blink.

My axe cut across him no less than three times in rapid succession,

each time striking a lethal blow. In my rage, I did not stop my assault, fully chopping off two of his limbs before finally having the decency to put his excruciating final moments to a bloody end. My last strike quite neatly severed his head from his body in a fountain of gore. *Not Virgil! ...why? What have you done?!*

I turned my attention next to the man holding a sword, who looked as though he was in the process of turning around. He'd barely even realized that I was in the room and I was already behind him, my axe striking out once again. I could feel the blood pumping through my veins so hard that it felt as though every limb in my body might burst at any moment. My arms surged with strength as I brought my axe down across the man's neck and back, and not until it had embedded itself into the stone floor did my axe ever stop.

Nearly a third of the man's body was severed in an instant, his head and the left half of his torso landing on the ground with a wet thud. I dropped my axe as he fell, kneeling down next to Virgil with tears in my eyes. I pulled his helmet off and winced when I saw the amount of blood staining his neck and his face. *No, Virgil, not you, too... I can't bear to lose you, too...*

I placed my hand on his neck to try and feel for a pulse, but I knew what to expect even before checking. There was no pulse, no heartbeat, no blood flowing through his veins... Virgil was dead. The tears wouldn't stop flowing from my eyes. I couldn't think, I didn't know what to do. All I could focus on was that I was too late, I couldn't save Virgil in the end. He was the last person in the world that I truly felt close to, the only person remaining that I really trusted... and now he was gone.

Sobs wracked my body evenly with guilt. *I wasn't fast enough... if only I hadn't wasted so much time in Quintarra...* I rested my forehead on the cold exterior of the plate armor I'd made for Virgil. *I made this to protect you... but in the end it wasn't enough. I wasn't good enough. I... I failed you.*

I felt something wet on my shoulder and I looked up to see tears in Sebastian's eyes. "Aw, hell... he was a good kid... why'd he have to go running off like that, anyhow?" He placed his hand on my shoulder

and looked away, trying to hold back the tears for my sake. Terry looked me in the face and began licking the tears off of my cheeks.

Vollinger's voice broke the silence, and with good reason, "I'm not the most familiar with things of a magickal nature, but I do believe the scroll sitting on that barrel is a scroll of resurrection." *Vollinger... oh, thank you... I'm so glad I kept you along after all...*

I looked up, suddenly hopeful, "Can you use it? Do you think it'll work?" My mind began racing. *It doesn't have to end like this, we can bring you back... I won't lose you, Virgil! I can't lose you! I can't bear to!*

Vollinger shook his head sadly, "No... I could never get a scroll of this magnitude to function. If any of us can... I think it will be you." *Me...? You want ME to use a magickal scroll?*

Doubt assaulted my mind. *It'll never work... this magick is complex for me. My technological affinity has only grown over the years... such a powerful scroll might not even work in the same ROOM as me...*

Regardless of my personal reservations, I had to try. Virgil's spirit was rapidly drifting away and if I didn't do something soon I would never be able to bring him back at all. I tried to remain positive, tried to fill myself with false confidence. As long as I held a firm will, maybe... just maybe... *It will work, it has to work. I've used scrolls before to good effect... I'm Virgil's only hope now, I can't fail him. Virgil, I won't fail you again...* "Give me that scroll, quickly!"

Vollinger handed the scroll off to me and I rolled it out in front of me. *I've been good, whatever gods are out there looking over me have to know that... I've not stolen anything for a long time now, and I did my best to rid the world of the horrible Dark Elves... I've helped people for no personal gain, like Maximillian and Loghaire... no just god could possibly deny me this one wish. Please... please, to any Gods that might be listening, please bring Virgil back to me.* I read the words on the scroll aloud and then closed my eyes, feeling the scroll crumble between my hands. Then I felt it slipping, turning... something had gone horribly wrong.

"No... Virgil, no..... VIIIRGIIILL!!!"

Chapter the Fifty Fourth:

Reunion

My anguished screams echoed off of the basement walls for what seemed like an eternity. *This isn't happening. You can't be dead... why? Why wouldn't it work? Dammit, I've been good! If there is a god in this world that will show me mercy in light of my actions, then I pray to you now... please, save Virgil.... Whether it's Nasrudin, the Living One, or even bloody Arronax I don't even care, but somebody... anybody... please, bring Virgil back to me...* I sobbed and I sobbed, and not one of my companions had the heart to pull me away.

Suddenly, I felt something strange. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up and my skin began to itch. I opened my eyes and I saw the fragments of the scroll around my feet begin to glow bright blue. They lifted up off of the ground and began swirling about me. I became surrounded by a ribbon of magickal energy as the pieces of the scroll encircled me and whirled around and around. For once, I welcomed the discomfort and the itching, if only it would bring Virgil back to me.

The ribbon flowed into his lifeless body, dissipating as it did so. My breath caught in my throat as I worried what would come next, and wondered what could even cause an expended scroll to reactivate itself so. Through the ceiling above me I saw a figure outlined in blue, upside down, falling. It was almost skeletal, but it came through the ceiling as if it had no substance. Then, I saw his face... Virgil's face, staring down at me as his spirit descended. He had a look of extreme peace and happiness... and I saw him smiling at me.

His spirit continued to fall, straight into his lifeless body. A blue and white light shone starting from his chest, and from there spreading throughout the rest of his body, enveloping it. The few wounds that I could see externally began to close up and his skin flushed with color.

His legs began to move ever so slightly, and then more. I saw the pool of blood on the ground slowly begin to shrink. The light shone so brightly at that moment I could scarcely see, but I refused to close my eyes. *Virgil... Virgil is coming back to me...!*

When at last the light dimmed down, Virgil was standing in front of me looking like he didn't have a single scratch on him. The look on his face was unchanged from the look his spirit gave me. He was calm, peaceful, and smiling straight at me. There wasn't even a drop of blood on the ground any longer.

I ran up to him and hugged him tightly, "Virgil! By the gods, you're all right!"

He placed his arm around me and patted me on the shoulder. "Greetings, my friend... it seems... well, it seems we both have come a long way." The tone of Virgil's voice was somehow different, softer in a way, calm. I looked up at him and his eyes seemed so peaceful in that moment, but also empty. I started to hear gentle footsteps in the background... I turned, but all I saw was a strange looking old man wearing a dirty robe. He stopped when I saw him and simply stood there, looking on patiently.

The look in his eyes was gentle and I didn't think he meant any harm, so I was of a mind to ignore him entirely. Whatever he wanted could wait, my attention at that moment was solely Virgil's. *You've come back to me... I'm so glad you came back...* I looked up at him with tears in my eyes, feeling strangely distant when I saw that calm look in his eyes, but not distant in the same way that I felt before he had left in the first place. "Virgil, what happened here?"

"These men... they were the men who killed my brother, Lawrence." He looks around at them, almost with pity.

"I had come here tonight to confront my past, once and for all. I knew that it would most certainly lead to my own death, but I just couldn't run from it any longer..."

I could have helped you... you knew... you knew and yet you still left... Tears came to my eyes again, tears of shame, regret, guilt, and loneliness. I would've scolded him, but I couldn't... I cared for him too much, and I was just glad to have him back. "Can you tell me the

story, Virgil?"

He nodded calmly, "Yes... it no longer holds any power over me." I felt his chest expand as he inhaled deeply, preparing to tell me the tale that he'd been hiding from me for so long.

Before I met you, before I met Joachim, I was very different. I was a criminal, really, an evil man... there's no other way to say it, and I don't mind admitting it to you now. I lived my life like a dead man... well, at least in the sense that I used to view such things. I cared very little for anything at all, I only lived from moment to moment, no sense of right or wrong... I stole, or lied, or even killed with no thought for morality or consequence. And the men I associated with were the same way... such lives feed upon themselves.

My family moved to Caladon when I was younger. Lawrence and I were close in our early years, but the life I chose to lead as I grew older was repulsive to him, and we finally had a falling out. At the time, I didn't care... the dead have no family, and remember not their pasts. This basement... is a place for the walking dead... a place where men gather to feed their darker sides. I knew it well... too well. I spent a lot of time here... time and money. I also gambled with men who make a living doing so, and one night I lost more money than I had.

I was threatened physically when I couldn't pay... but what is pain to dead men? I laughed and bled and spat on them. It was only then that they threatened to kill my brother if I didn't pay. Of course, I thought it only a threat, and, really, in the end I didn't feel anything about the matter. I'd left all of that behind me... or at least that's what I thought.

I can't tell you the pain which tore open my very soul when I found Lawrence, bleeding and broken, the life gone out of him. I cursed myself, and the gods, and everything else I had forsaken, and I ran. I ran so far and so fast that I don't remember anything until I woke up on the doorstep of the Panarii temple where Joachim took me in.

The old man who had quietly walked in shortly after Virgil came back finally spoke, his voice deep and strangely accented. "Yesss," he intoned softly, "And doesn't that seem like so very long ago, Virgil...?"

My mouth dropped open, "Joachim!" *We looked for you for so long...*
"Yes. It is I. I must apologize... I have been so busy trying to find out who was trying to kill you and why, that I neglected to consider the fact that you might need help in other matters. But you are alive, and so I rejoice...."

"How did you know where to find us?" *Gods, so much has happened since I first started searching for you... I finally know where to find the Black Mountain Clan, I've turned the Molochean Hand against the Dark Elves... it seems like I've been busy, too, since that zeppelin crash... that zeppelin that I never even should have been on...*

Joachim shrugged innocently, as though finding us was no big deal. "I'd heard that Virgil was back in Caladon, alone." *Now how did you hear a thing like that? You are one mysterious, old man, Joachim.* "I feared the worst, as I knew a little more about his past than you did. I've been searching for him for the past week, and only now did I find him. You've changed much, young Virgil..."

Virgil nodded, smiling at his old mentor. Seeing the two of them reunited at long last warmed my heart. When Virgil spoke again his voice still had that strange tone to it and I wondered if he would remain quite so calm for the rest of the time that I knew him. "Yes, Joachim. And I have seen much. But I still remember the lessons you taught me. They have brought me through all of this. Even through death itself..."

I listened quietly as Joachim and Virgil continued chatting, not wanting to interrupt them after they'd spent so long apart. "I knew from the moment I saw you that you were special somehow, that you were meant for more than the life you left behind. And I see that I was right... the Living One couldn't have chosen a better companion. You will be a powerful ally in the battle to come..."

Ugh. You had to go and remind me... if it's all the same to you, I really don't want to think about Arronax right now. "What have YOU been doing, Joachim?" I said it almost as if it were an accusation, hammering home the point that there were probably more important things to help out with besides the Molochean Hand. True, the book Joachim found helped me, but it had been quite a long time since he'd found that book and it was all I needed to put an end to the

assassination attempts.

He seemed embarrassed suddenly, "Well, since I left Stillwater, I've been trying to find out if the prophecies say anymore about what it is you're supposed to be doing. Unless I've missed something, Arronax hasn't yet returned. What have YOU found out?" He said it in the same accusatory tone that I had, almost insinuating that chasing after Virgil was unnecessary.

I resent that implication, old man. I just... oh hell, I'm just happy Virgil is alive... I suppose I can put up with your questioning. "I followed the trail of the Black Mountain Clan all the way from Bates' betrayal to their banishment. The Dark Elves banished them to the Void so they could build a machine to help Arronax return. I've already informed the Silver Lady of Qintarra, and am now seeking to speak with the priests at the First Panarii Temple here in Caladon."

He nodded slowly, soaking in what I'd just told him. "Ah. That's quite a tale. You've done very well, and I think your journey is approaching the end."

If that's the case I really hope Arronax dislikes axes in his kidneys. "I hope so. Are you coming with us, Joachim?"

"No... I think that you're in capable hands."

He smiles at Virgil.

"I am no longer needed here, but I'm sure I can find something to keep me busy. Good luck. May the spirit of Nasrudin be with you and guide your path. Farewell."

After so much anticipation of the time when Joachim would finally arrive to answer all of our questions, it seemed strange to just let him go... but, when I thought about it, we did just fine without him. Perhaps he was best left to do whatever it is he does behind the scenes, finding tidbits of information we didn't even know would be important until years later. "Farewell to you, Joachim." He took a few steps back, nodding peacefully, but still staying around. I supposed I didn't mind him listening in on my conversation with Virgil, and that way I could ask him right away if any new questions came up. I turned back to Virgil, the tears still not quite ready to stop. "Virgil... you were saying...?" *I'm still just... I'm so glad you're all right.*

Virgil shrugged, and it was obvious that he felt what he was telling me held no further importance to him. It was important to me, however, I wanted to understand Virgil... and, in turn, I wanted him to understand me. "I was just saying that I came here tonight to face my past, and to avenge my brother whom I betrayed. These men were the men who killed him. I knew that I wouldn't survive, but the weight of his death, and my cowardice, were too much to bear any longer. And here you found me..."

...and I tried so hard to save you, but I wasn't fast enough... gods, I don't know what the hell happened with that scroll but I'm so happy that it did... "Can I ask you a few questions about it, Virgil?"

He nodded, "Yes, of course..."

I still couldn't help but notice the incredible peace in his voice, the calm and distant look in his eyes. I looked deep down, still feeling pain and torment when I thought of the past. I envied Virgil, I wanted to find that same peace that he had, but it didn't seem even remotely possible. I could never get over the deaths of Frederick and Nathaniel. "Tell me, Virgil... was it worth it? Do you feel that weight any less?"

He is silent for a moment.

"Yes... well... I saw Lawrence, you see... I saw him on the other side. We didn't really speak, but I felt that he was at peace, that he held no ill will towards me. That lessened my guilt, allowed me to see that those choices I'd made were made by someone else... another man, and that I had left that man behind..."

I swallowed hard, suddenly uncomfortable. *Is it all right to think that way? To just pretend that who you are now has nothing to do with who you were? I don't know if I'm strong enough to do that...* "The other side... tell me about death, Virgil. What was it like?" *Frederick... Nathaniel... what has become of you?*

"It was..." he seemed to have difficulties putting his experience into words. I placed my hand on his, reassuring him. "...well, peaceful, I suppose. I remember very little... I have memories of a gray place, warm, silent... there was no pain there, no suffering... and I remember feeling that it was boundless, a place that was no place... not a prison nor a punishment, but freedom without end."

"You sound as if you enjoyed it, somehow..." *Although I miss the both of you dearly, it would bring joy to my heart to think that you are somehow happy... even if I am not a part of that happiness any longer...*

Virgil gave it thought, and he seemed to mostly agree in the end. "I did, in a strange way. You've no idea what it's like to let go of everything that constitutes our struggles in this life... pain, greed, envy, guilt. It's liberating, even in its emptiness." He thought about it for a moment, realizing that what he was saying left only further questions. "I can honestly say that I wanted to come back, to finish what I'd began with you, but that a small part of me wanted very badly to stay. And I think that I carry that gray place with me always... a small piece of death..."

I hit him lightly on the shoulder, cracking a slight smile from behind my tears. "Oh, stop. If you keep going on like this I'm going to have to ask you to kill me, as a friend." *At this point... I welcome it. To see Nathaniel again, and apologize for what I caused... to be with Frederick again, and feel no guilt... no pain... how could I not want that?*

Virgil frowned, "Don't even joke about that, Samantha. One day, when our journey is done, and after you've lead a long and fulfilling life... that peace will always be waiting for you. Don't be so eager to go before your time."

You have no idea, Virgil... My tears started flowing again, stronger. I couldn't push away the pain that I felt any longer. I tried to change the subject, but I could tell Virgil saw right through me. "You should have told me. I would have helped you..." It was true, at least. "I know you would have, but this was a journey that I had to make myself."

He laughs.

"This all sounds so bloody serious, doesn't it? This wise and introspective gibberish doesn't fit me very well. I'll do my best to put a cap on it. But it has changed me for the better, and I thank you once again..."

Hmph, thank me...? Thank me for what? For failing to protect you, letting you run off to get yourself killed? Those deeds don't deserve thanks. He

looked in my eyes, seeing my sadness and overwhelming guilt, the tears that continued to flow. "Samantha... what is it you want to say? What's bothering you?" The look in his eyes was so sympathetic... so kind...

I can't be like you, Virgil... I can't just let it go. This pain... this guilt... it will be with me as long as I live... It hurt so terribly to put my anguish into words, but I just couldn't hold it in any longer. Tears flowed down my cheeks in a steady stream as I tried to explain what I'd gone through, "I... failed you, Virgil. I know you're still grateful to me, but if I hadn't been so slow... so stupid... you wouldn't even have died. More than that... it's not the first time. Everybody close to me... you're not the only one with blood on your hands...."

He seemed almost sad, but in that calm way that he had about him since he'd been resurrected. "I wish you no ill will, if that eases your guilt any. It is not your fault I ran off without you and came to this place... you need not feel responsible. I cannot speak to anything else that has happened to you, but... I am sorry. I know well what it is like to carry such a heavy burden. It may seem hypocritical of me to offer, but if you want any help facing up to it-"

"I can't, Virgil!" I screamed at him, though I wasn't angry with him at all... I was only angry with myself. I rested my head against his chest and continued to cry, "believe me, I would happily take you up on that offer if I could... but I can't... it's not possible..." He looked at me, confused. "I'm the one to blame, Virgil... there's nobody else left. I have no basement I can run to where I can confront my past once and for all. I just... I have to live with it. That's it."

"Please," he begged me softly, "Won't you at least unload your burden? Won't you share it with me? I know something of death, however little, and I might be able to bring you some small measure of comfort. I... I would like to help you, in any way I can... as a friend." I nodded tearfully, steadying myself against the nearby table.

"Before I met you, I had a husband, Frederick... and a son, Nathaniel. I've spoken of my husband to you once before, briefly. We enjoyed so many things together, especially books and history. I... Frederick is dead now, because of me... because I ran... no, I suppose I ought to

tell you everything. I've wanted to tell somebody, to tell you, specifically... it's just so hard. It really all began with the death of my son.

Nathaniel... he was so fascinated by technology, all kinds of it really. Most of all he seemed interested in herbology. It was rare enough for a child to take a genuine interest in technology, but even rarer to be attracted to one of the less flashy disciplines instead of one like explosives. Boys will be boys, you know how it goes.

Well, Frederick thought it was wonderful and he planted an entire herb garden for Nathaniel to play around with. He did so love to play around in that garden, and experiment with all of the different kinds of herbs... he was convinced he wanted to be an herbalist when he grew up. I... I just... sometimes I miss him so much. I tried so hard to encourage him, and I suppose that's when I first became truly interested in technology. It's strange, isn't it? Learning from one's child instead of the other way around?

One day Nathaniel came into the study where I was reading a book and he asked to see the gun that Frederick kept in there for protection. He was getting older, he was thirteen... I just figured that it was about time for his interest in herbalism to wane in favor of something more like a proper young boy. He was curious about so many things that I really didn't think anything of it, so I just let him borrow it for awhile... I didn't even watch him, I just kept reading my damned book. Gods, I was a horrible mother... a horrible person.

Not ten minutes later I saw a sudden movement in the next room over, and then I heard the bang. I threw my book down and ran into the living room... there was so much blood, by the gods there was so much blood. I panicked. I just sat there staring in horror... and he looked up at me with tears in his eyes. I'll never forget the way he said, 'I'm sorry, Mother.' I screamed, and finally Frederick showed up... he must've been nearby and heard... when he saw what had happened he ran off to get the doctor.

But it was too late. The bullet had pierced Nathaniel's lung, and the doctor couldn't save him. He was buried in the Caladon cemetery two days later. Frederick returned to work the next day... and that's when

I ran. I lost my son to my own negligence, then I robbed my husband and ran away from him. I've felt terrible about that for a long time, it was so selfish of me.... I could only focus on my own pain, I never thought of what it would do to Frederick to lose his wife and his son in the same week.

After my memories and my guilt began to fade I began looking forward to returning home, coming back to Frederick and telling him of all my adventures. I wanted to apologize for what I'd done. In my adventures I've earned enough money to buy back everything I stole and more... but by the time I returned to Caladon, he was already dead. He couldn't handle losing us both. Because I left him, he... I will never get to look into his eyes again.

I killed them both, Virgil... the two people that meant the most to me. It's nobody's fault but my own, there's nobody else to blame, nobody for me to confront so I can bring resolution to my past. This is a pain I caused, and I have to live with it. ...and I keep doing it, too... I've failed you as well. I don't know what brought you back, but it wasn't me. I couldn't save you in the end."

Exhausted from having forced my tale out at last, I rested my head against Virgil's chest and I just cried. "That doesn't matter," He shook his head, "I did what I had to do, you're not responsible. It may not be my place to say it, but... I don't think you should blame yourself for what happened in your past either. We all make mistakes... let the past be the past, Samantha... let it go."

Don't you understand how badly I wish I could? How I've tried to run away? Running away only made it worse... and now I've nothing left to even run from. My eyes felt puffy, and they ached horribly. I'd been crying nonstop since arriving in the basement, and for as long as my thoughts remained on my past I knew the tears would continue to flow. I had hoped telling Virgil about it would make me feel better, but it didn't. I still missed Frederick horribly, and Nathaniel too. I changed the subject suddenly, hoping to put an end to my blubbing. "Even knowing my past, will you still accompany me?" *For what it's worth, Virgil, thanks for listening... and at least trying to make me feel better.*

"Yes, of course! I will journey with you as your protector and as your

friend. As if I've got a bloody choice! Aren't we all just pawns of prophecy?"

He laughs.

"And something else... I'm not sure, but I think that something has happened to me as a result of all of this... I may be better equipped to face Arronax when the time comes..."

I hugged him again, the last of my tears streaming down his armor.

"I'm glad, Virgil. Shall we...?"

He nodded and smiled, "Yes... let us continue on."

As we turned to depart, Joachim gave us one final goodbye. "Good luck to you, Living One."

"Thank you, Joachim. We'll need it." *Now is no time to be crying about my past. I've got demons to slay, and a divine corpse to track down.*

On our way out I noticed the crumbled remains of the scroll still lying on the ground, scattered. *Now that's strange... I could've sworn I saw that scroll stir back to life...*

Chapter the Fifty Fifth: Loose Ends

With so much focus on the death of those I loved, I remembered uncomfortably the amulet I was carrying in my purse. Although I had never held the prince in a particularly high esteem, he at least deserved to know. The five of us traveled silently after the events in that horrible basement, each lost in our own thoughts. The silence was only broken as I spoke with the castle guards to gain entry.

The prince was still pacing back and forth in the entry hall of the castle proper, for which I couldn't particularly blame him. The castle made me uncomfortable, as did the idiot prince, so I got to the point as quickly as possible... even if it was a touch curt. "I found an amulet you gave to Princess Aria of Cumbria."

"Dear god! Speak up, woman! Is she in trouble? Where is she?" I hated his attitude, and I always had. He seemed to think he was so damned entitled to everything. It was as though he failed to realize his troubles weren't the only troubles in the world. "I know, but information is costly these days." It was cruel, but I was in a foul, bitter mood. *I am a wicked, wicked woman.*

At first he gave me a particularly shocked look, aghast at how a peasant woman could dare to offend him so. Then, when he took a closer look, at my axe and at my companions, it dawned on him that I was not a citizen of Caladon. *At least I'm not anymore....* His shoulders slumped, defeated, and he gave me a hard stare. "I see. Well, what are you asking?"

My dislike of the man blinded me far more than any semblance of greed. The higher the amount, the greater the insult. *He's the prince... he can afford it..* "300 gold coins."

His face flushed red with anger and he very nearly shouted at me,

"You must be joking! I'll pay 100 gold pieces, and no more." *100 gold pieces? For knowledge of your missing bride? By the Gods, you're even more spoiled than I thought. Is that really all she's worth to you?*

I was utterly disgusted. I didn't even want to think of the kind of money Frederick had to spend to pardon me from prison, and I was just a thieving whore he'd taken a fancy to. The man in front of me wouldn't even pay over 100 coins for the sake of his bride, a princess no less! "Deal." I couldn't withhold the truth from him no matter how angry I was... that was too cruel even for me. *You spoiled little brat, news of her death probably won't bother you any longer than a week. Gods, I hate royalty!*

He counted out the coins from his own pocket and gave them to me. I was sure he'd just replenish them from the royal coffers later, which would in turn be replenished through the blood and tears of the people. My seething hatred shone through in my speech, "Her ship crashed off Razor's Cape. She's dead."

"No! Not my dear Aria! Alas, I am to blame... I sent an incompetent sea captain! I am lost. If only I had something to remember her by..."

That was a bit cruel to say it like that... but dammit, he had it coming! I sighed regretfully. "Please accept this, her amulet. I share your grief." Acting upon my feelings of hatred and anger always made me feel so empty. Perhaps I'd simply grown soft in the years that I'd spent with Frederick and Nathaniel, but I didn't really view it as such a bad thing.

Before I could think too much on it he handed me another sack of coins, a significantly larger one. "Madam, please accept my deepest thanks, as well as this insignificant sum. You'll never know what this means to me." *How I only wish I didn't.* He turned, no longer having anybody to wait anxiously for, and stalked down the hallway in tears. It was my turn to leave as well.

While I still had business to take care of in Caladon, I instead chose to remove myself from it for awhile. My encounter with the prince assured me that I wasn't ready to handle things with an even hand yet. I'd acted out of anger, letting my recent experiences blind me, letting my emotions take control. I was in such a foul mood,

desperately wishing that I could follow in Virgil's footsteps and confront my past... and further, so many things in Caladon reminded me of Frederick. It was like a walking nightmare of guilt. I had to get away for awhile and let those memories fade. I still had a bit of business remaining for me in Roseborough and that seemed like as good of a place to get some fresh air as any.

I approached the elegant old inn from the South, already preparing what I was going to say to Trevor when I gave him his camera back. *You see, the wyvern... might not actually exist anymore...* I caught a name off of a nearby house as I passed, *Morgan*. It seemed somehow familiar to me, but I was having difficulties placing from where. *Morgan, Morgan, Morgan... I heard it some time ago... early in my travels...* I had nearly passed the house by completely when it suddenly clicked and I immediately turned around. *Morgan! The lock picking expert!* An older, halfling woman answered the door when I knocked. "Greetings, Mrs. Morgan. Might I have a moment of your time?"

"I am in the midst of a small difficulty. I fear I do not have time for you. Please excuse my rude behavior. Goodbye."

Dammit, I'm not going away that easy. If there's anything left for me to know about picking locks, then I'm going to bloody learn about it!

"Perhaps I could be of assistance?" If I had to run some fool's errand for the privilege of training, then so be it. It wouldn't be the first time.

She ignored my suggestion and started to close the door when she suddenly stopped and looked me over more carefully. The door swung open again, "You do appear quite experienced. Have you heard of my son's predicament?"

Why the bloody hell do you think I'm here? Nobody talks about 'that random fellow' that went off to jail, but it's a whole different story when that fellow is the master of picking locks. "I have. He is being held in Caladon's high security prison. I had been hoping to seek his knowledge as a trainer."

A smug grin spread across her face and she crossed her arms. Her tone shifted to one of suggestive superiority. "That is a bit difficult,

considering his predicament, don't you think?"

Good heavens, why can you not just ask me straight out like a normal person? "Yes, but perhaps there is something I could do about that." I hated having to offer, instead of her asking, but I wasn't going to let a silly distinction like that stand in the way of training. *Ugh... the walls of a Caladonian prison are just about the LAST thing I want to see right now...*

"I see. And if there was something you could do... what would you ask in return?"

Her dancing around the topic was really beginning to get on my nerves. It felt like she expected me to shout my intent to break her son out of prison from off of a mountaintop before she'd make the arrangement with me. Did she so desperately want me to get caught, and for her son to stay in jail? "Merely that he train me as a master, nothing more."

She sat there, grinning, pretending as though she were considering it. Her body language betrayed her slight deception, I was just wondering if she was enjoying her little game with me or if it was some kind of test. "Hmmm. He is capable of training you..."

Really? Do you think so? Well, that's a load off my mind! OF COURSE HE CAN BLOODY TRAIN ME! "I feel it is a small request, considering the risks I would take." I was thankful for my ability to remain calm even despite her excessively annoying personality.

At last, she finally seemed to relent, and it was about damned time. "Perhaps you can be of assistance. Let me think for a moment..." I could tell she was thinking quite hard about how exactly to best use my offer of assistance now that she'd finally decided I could help her son out after all. I could see the idea suddenly bloom by the way her face lit up with inspiration and the tone of her voice seemed quite excited, "I've got an idea! Now listen carefully..."

"I have a set of J.T.'s locksmith tools. If you could get them to him, I'm sure he would be able to escape. Do you feel up to the task?"

Can I? Sure. Do I want to? Gods no. Will I anyway? Absolutely. "I am capable. But can you assure me that he will train me?"

She took out a small, red strip of cloth that had been rolled up tightly and she pressed it into my hand. I could feel the pointy edges of the tools poking out from the sides of the cloth, and their bulk provided the cloth with a substantial weight it would otherwise lack. "Oh thank you! I will go to him on the morrow and inform him of our agreement. I give you my promise as a mother. If you get these tools to him, he will train you."

I let out a rather expressive sigh, stuffing the small pouch of tools into my purse. "I will agree to this. I shall trust your word, madam."

"Some advice," she cautioned before I could leave. "There are several locked passages that you must pass through, in addition to guard patrols. You will have to use every ounce of skill you possess. Also, the night guard appears a lazy lout. Perhaps that will be in your favor, perhaps not. Here are the tools. Please help my son get out of that vile place! Thank you."

Well, I can certainly see where JT gets his propensity for larceny. His mother's not exactly an angel, is she? "Thank you for the advice. I am off. You have my word that he shall be free."

Without a further word, I departed the house and continued on my way to the inn. Trevor was pacing back and forth in the lobby nervously, no doubt upset at the amount of time it had been since I took his camera and walked off to the North. He'd probably assumed me dead, but I really had more pressing matters to take care of than giving him his camera back. I tried to take his mind off of the delay by opening with good news. "I've got it, Trevor! I've got the photograph!"

"You got it! Oh my! I'm so excited! You don't know how helpful you've been! Here... let me see the camera."

Takes it from me.

"Mr. Wright is going to be so thrilled!"

Hmm, good... that seemed to have worked. When I really think about it, mentioning the wyvern's death is probably... not entirely necessary. Why go to such trouble only to upset him? Yes, I think I'll just be leaving that little tidbit out. "Glad I could be of service. Now about my compensation..."

He pulled out a pouch of coins unhesitantly and handed it to me. "Oh yes. Here you are... 500 coin, as agreed upon. Thank you, Samantha. You don't know how happy you've made me! Goodbye."

The whole ordeal was honestly far easier than I'd expected it would be. After delaying for who knows how many months I'd finally given him his camera back and he paid me in full without a single question. "Thank you, Trevor. Goodbye."

He turned to go back to his room, or perhaps to try and skip out of the inn without paying the bill for his lengthy stay, but then suddenly turned back around again as if he'd forgotten something. "Wait! What of the bridge? Did you see any signs of it?"

Ah, right... I suppose that was fairly useful. "I did, thank you. It definitely saved me a lot of time."

"That is wonderful news! I am sure the existence of that bridge has been lost for years! It will surely speed travel. Well, I had better get this camera back to Tarant. Thank you again, Samantha Colburn. Goodbye."

I guessed that he was just too damned happy about my successful return to be overly bothered about how long I'd taken, or how much I'd possibly cost him in lodging expenses. Then again, I was pretty sure he'd be skipping out on the bill. The last I'd spoken with him he was complaining about the expenses for a single week, and the Roseborough Inn certainly didn't look cheap. I'd probably have done the same, so I decided not to rat him out.

Well... there's precious little else for me to do. I only hoped that the week or two I would end up staying away from Caladon would be enough to put my memories at rest, for a little while at least. A very large part of me still yearned for Frederick, and was still wracked with guilt over his and Nathaniel's deaths, but I couldn't waste any more time moping about it. I had to be strong, for Virgil's sake if nobody else's.

I'd survived an ancient order of assassins out for my blood long enough that I could convince them of the error in their ways, certainly I ought to have been able to survive my own guilt.

Somehow, the latter bothered me so much more, but there would be time enough to come to terms with it once I'd finished up my rather lengthy quest. If I was lucky Arronax would just kill me quickly, and I could join Frederick in the afterlife... peacefully. *No, I can't go on thinking like that... Virgil would scold me so harshly if he knew what I was thinking.*

When I arrived back in Caladon my first stop was at the police station. Although I took a small amount of amusement in working both for the police and for a known criminal they held captive, I did the former purely out of sympathy and duty. If the demon had been terrorizing the upper class I probably wouldn't have cared. "Good day, Inspector Henderson. I have retrieved the Blade of Xerxes. You were right, it was a real joy to get." *Jyheirad might disagree, but I suspect even he might've enjoyed it.*

"I can only say I am glad it was you and not me. In reviewing all the evidence, I think it is fairly obvious this creature is holed up in the old sewers. Go to the sewer entrance at the end of this alley; the guards will let you in."

Although I was certain the inspector took my statement to be sarcastic, sitting out by the dying fire and chatting away while those poor bastards retrieved the blade for me actually was rather enjoyable. Nevertheless, I had a demon to slay. "Alright. Wish me luck!" I departed the police station, noting that the guard in front of the prison was not yet asleep. I was no master of prowling so I decided to put that particular goal of mine on hold until the evening hours.

I continued towards the sewers, though I slowed when I passed by the office for the newspaper. I'd been so busy with other concerns that I had completely forgotten to check up on the newspaper story based on the journal I'd found at Half Ogre Island. I stepped inside of the shop briefly, but the man I'd spoken to didn't seem to be in.

"Excuse me, where's Sam Longwell?"

"Who? My name is James Legget. I work here. I'm afraid I don't know any Sam Longwell."

Please tell me you're joking. This had better be a damned joke. "He was working here. I spoke to him... he said he was a reporter?"

The man shrugged helplessly, "I'm the only reporter who works out of this office. Local Caladonian reporter for, what, twenty years now? When did you speak to this fellow?"

I flipped through my journal, knowing that I'd noted it down when it happened. "December 3rd, 1887" *Good god, that was almost a year ago already... how much time did I spend wandering through the Glimmering Forest, anyway?*

He flipped through a journal of his own, then looked up at me. He smacked his palm with his fist angrily, "What is going on around here?! I was sent on a wild goose chase that day, tracking down a mysterious anonymous tip that was wired here. Someone is playing us for fools, madam!"

It can't be... no... I gave it right to them... I didn't even think... by the gods, that was all the proof I had! "So the guy I told my story to wasn't a reporter?"

"As I said, I'm the only reporter that works out of this office. What's your story? Perhaps I'd be interested in it myself."

I knew even before I opened my mouth that it was hopeless, but I had to try. I sighed heavily and told him, "I know what this sounds like, but you have to believe me that I had proof... until I gave it to that fellow pretending to work here. I helped to uncover a gnomish conspiracy. They've been illegally breeding half ogres for years, for the purpose of using them as bodyguards. I found a journal detailing their use of prostitutes, and... even the Queen of Tarant."

He started smiling a bit before seeing the look on my face and subsequently trying to hold himself back. "Heh. That's... well, I've heard some outlandish tales in my day, but that is just about the wildest."

Damnation! If only I didn't give away the journal! "It's true, I tell you!" I knew I wasn't making my case any stronger, but I was thoroughly angered and upset. I'd tried so hard to expose those damned gnomes, and in the end it amounted to nothing.

"I'm sure it is." He finally smiled in a horribly patronizing manner, barely bothering to try and conceal his contempt for what he thought

to be a product of my own lunacy. "I need to get back to work now. If you'll excuse me..."

Don't you dare treat me like an imbecile! Son of a bitch! I stormed out of the office, furious at the reporter, but even moreso at myself for having botched my only opportunity to expose the corruption of the gnomish council. I was livid... if I had been in Tarant at that moment I have no doubt I would have found the nearest council member and struck him down where he stood. I made it a point to keep out of Tarant for the next while. I needed to stay out of prison at least long enough to sneak into one and break a particular master of picking locks out.

I knew just where to vent my anger, and thankfully it was in a place that would please the authorities instead of enrage them. I approached the entrance to the old sewers, eager to get to the grim business at hand.

"Be careful down there, eh?"

You know who should be careful? It's that damned demon that should be careful... and the gnomish council members if I ever set my bloody eyes on one of them again. I climbed down into the sewers and drew my axe at the first sight of malevolent creatures. For once, I welcomed the opportunity to wield my axe. I ran straight into the center of a whole mess of flying, bat-like things and I swung away mercilessly. I ripped whole wings off, and shredded others. The strange creatures crowded around me angrily, biting at my armor, but I just kept swinging. Vollinger and Sebastian tried to help out with their guns, but the creatures were clustered so closely around me that they didn't dare risk hitting me.

Out of the corner of my eye I saw Terry leap into the air and take a bat creature down with him, savagely tearing it apart once he hit the ground. Just as I kept swinging my axe, he kept repeating the grim process until at last all of the foul creatures were dead.

The next corridor saw even more of them, which I was only too happy to rip apart with Terry's help. The others sat back uncomfortably, never having seen me in a proper rage before. Even I wasn't terribly comfortable with myself, but damn if it didn't feel

good to imagine Willoughsby's head on each of those bloody bats before swinging away. *That silver-tongued bastard is well aware of the atrocities he's committed, if only I'd have realized it sooner...* More and more bat creatures exploded as my axe chopped clear through them.

After rounding several more corners and effortlessly destroying more vicious little bat creatures I came face to face with some rather nauseating sewer mummies. Their bandages were soiled and unraveled, exposing the shriveled and rotten skin beneath. They stalked towards me with a frightening speed, raking my skin with cracked, dirty claws. I hated mummies.

Using my anger like fuel for a combat machine, I felled mummies in single strikes. I split their torsos in two or neatly lopped off their heads, and they groaned, toppling over in the sewer muck beneath my feet. I was careful to stop long enough to treat my wounds with salve, lest they develop a rather nasty infection. I didn't care to suffer from anything I'd catch from a mummy traipsing about in the sewers, that much was certain. Terry started gnawing on one of their corpses, but I rapped him on the snout and scolded him. He whined pathetically and I almost felt bad, but I really didn't want him getting sick off of the damned things. Instead, I tossed him a piece of jerky and he caught it mid-air.

At long last, the sewer widened out into a rather sizeable room. As I entered it I nearly failed to notice the scrawny elf leaning up against a wall in the corner near the entrance.

This well dressed elf seems to be in great pain.

"Please....leave me be. You are....."

He winces

".... in great danger...."

That's not really new to me... I'm in danger quite a bit, actually. I've gotten kind of used to it. "You are Vincent, are you not? I am here to kill you." It seemed like a rather odd and direct thing to say, but that elf was probably the one person in the world that would welcome such a greeting.

He tried to stand up, bracing himself further against the wall. "I hope you... brought the blade..."

I actually started to feel bad for him, but I quickly realized that killing him was the greatest mercy I could possibly have. I could help him in no other way. "Of course, I have it right here." At the same time, I would be putting a stop to the deaths around Caladon... the deaths of people who had hard lives already.

Very suddenly, he doubled over in pain, growling and coughing as he did so. I quick flipped out the blade, enjoying the familiar feel of a dagger in my hands. The growling slowly ceased and he stood up against the wall again, staring off into the distance. "I will try to keep the beast within until... until the end... but you must hurry... I am weak.."

All right, Vincent. I'll let neither you nor the whores L'anamelach has tortured suffer any longer. I closed my eyes, wrapping my hand tightly around the hilt of the mythical blade. I could feel its weight in my hands, the peculiar balance its odd shape imparted to it. When my eyes opened my hand was like lightning, years of reflex, training, and experience guiding my hands to just the right location. The dagger plunged into Vincent's back before he even had a chance to realize I'd moved. I held the dagger firmly as the expression on his face changed from one of determination and horror to one of pain, and at last a simple, peaceful calm. His face went blank and his body slowly slid off of the end of the blade, landing face first in the muck.

Goodbye, Vincent. I tossed the dagger into the muck next to him and I left the sewers, my rage spent. The others were silent in the wake of my targeted brutality, and I likely would have been as well if I'd just witnessed somebody else doing the same thing. I returned to the police station immediately, addressing the inspector quite bluntly, "Vincent is dead, and L'anamelach along with him. He'll bother this city no longer."

Inspector Henderson wiped the sweat off his brow and grinned at me, "Good work, dispatching that demon. Thank the gods I didn't have to do it this time. Here's the reward for killing that blasted thing." He tossed me a pouch containing the reward money we'd discussed earlier. I didn't particularly care, as that hadn't been my reason for

doing it, but I pocketed the money anyway.

I turned to leave, trying to remain polite. "It's been a pleasure," was about the best I could do for a man that sat idly by out of laziness, fear, apathy, or ineptitude while Caladonian citizens were dying as a direct result of his incompetence. *You didn't care, just because they were whores...* I grimly wondered if the next big killer would make police inspectors his target... perhaps Henderson would care then.

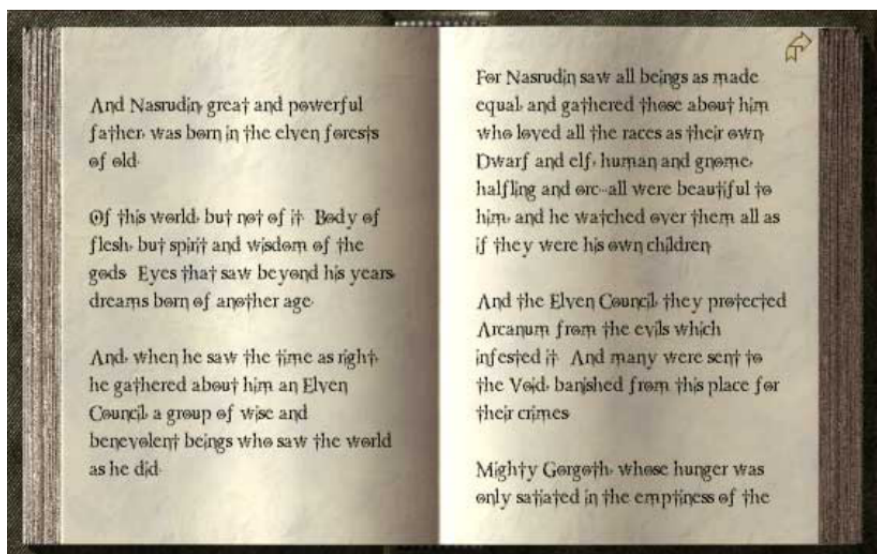
"I mean no disrespect, Samantha," Virgil placed a hand on my shoulder as he spoke, "But I can tell that you're quite upset. I just want you to know that I'm here for you if you ever want to talk." *There's that calm voice again... so much more direct and level than he used to be. It's not just that, but his entire attitude... goodness, Virgil, you've really changed.*

I sighed, thinking about it. As much as I would've liked to go on a gnomish killing spree, and as badly as I hated the inspector, it didn't do me any good to run around the city mad as all hell. The demon was dead, and if I tried going after the gnomish council they would just have me killed. The power brought by their wealth was more than a lowly 'adventurer' like myself could possibly stand against. I couldn't even have a news story printed about them. I placed my hand on Virgil's and turned to him, "Thanks, Virgil. I appreciate your concern. Let's go have a chat with the gents at the Panarii Temple, shall we? It's about time we settled this Arronax business."

"I agree," he smiled. We walked together down Temple Road and entered the towering structure at its end. It was truly palatial and grand, as one would hope for the first and largest temple to the most popular religion throughout all of Arcanum. The floors were made of wood, but polished clean. Rows of fancy chairs filled the center of the room.

At the front there was a decorative stone altar with large, unlit candles on either side. A man stood behind the altar on an ornate carpet, casting a friendly glance over at all of us as we entered. On either side of him were massive, decorative braziers that filled the entire room with light. My gaze shifted more closely towards myself, to the entryway I found myself in. There I saw a massive, aged tome

sitting atop a stone rack. The plate fastened to the rack read, 'The Archaeon'. I walked over to it and paged through it curiously. My fingers itched as I contacted the paper, and I knew the book was being held together by powerful magicks.



And Nasrudin great and powerful
father was born in the elven forests
of old.

Of this world but not of it. Body of
flesh but spirit and wisdom of the
gods. Eyes that saw beyond his years
dreams born of another age.

And when he saw the time as right
he gathered about him an Elven
Council a group of wise and
benevolent beings who saw the world
as he did.

For Nasrudin saw all beings as made
equal and gathered those about him
who loved all the races as their own.
Dwarf and elf human and gnome
halfling and orc all were beautiful to
him and he watched over them all as
if they were his own children.

And the Elven Council they protected
Arcanum from the evils which
infested it. And many were sent to
the Void banished from this place for
their crimes.

Mighty Gorgoth whose hunger was
only satiated in the emptiness of the

Void.

Kraka-tur, whose heart was dark and fearful, but whose fury was only

quenched in the blackness of the Void.

The Bane of Kree, whose bloodlust was limitless and could only be contained in the endlessness of the Void.

And Kerghan the Terrible, betrayer of the Elven Council, whose dark magicks were an abomination and could only be forgotten in the blankness of the Void.

And the land was peaceful, until the coming of Arronax.

So came Arronax, who wanted the world for himself, and all of its races as his slaves. And he brought war against Nasrudin and the Council.

And they faced Arronax at the Black Spire, and there was a clashing of armies and much life was lost. And there was a great battle between Arronax and Nasrudin, a battle to end all battles.

And great Nasrudin banished Arronax to the Void, and saved the world from darkness and pain.

But so great was this battle, that Nasrudin himself was mortally wounded. And so great Nasrudin traveled to the southernmost tip of the land, and there laid himself to rest.

But he watches over us still, awaiting the time when the evil shall return. And he shall come again, and he shall be strange to us, and some will not know his face. And His spirit shall be reborn on wings of fire in hills shrouded in fog, and there he shall fight the final battle with the evil one.

May your spirit walk always in the peace of Nasrudin.

I looked up from the book and wandered towards the front of the temple. As I neared the man standing there, however, Virgil stopped me.

"Wait! Do you see that man... the one at the front of the temple?"

It would be a touch difficult not to with where he's standing, don't you think? I sighed. "Yes... who is that?"

Virgil sounded incredibly excited, yet subdued... almost reverent. In fact, that's probably exactly what it was. "That's Alexander... First Acolyte of the Panarii Church. I never thought I'd actually lay eyes on him..."

I shrugged, somewhat embarrassed at my overall lack of knowledge regarding the Panarii religion. "What so special about him?"

Thankfully, it looked as though Virgil didn't really mind explaining it to me. That was one thing I really liked about his recent changes... actually, the only thing I really didn't like was that he had to die for it to happen. "The man's a living legend... Joachim used to tell me stories about him. Not a nobler soul in all of Arcanum, it's said. And he's a skilled warrior as well... not the sort you want to tangle with."

Sounds like an interesting sort, certainly. I approached the altar, stepping into the light of the braziers and Alexander gasped. "Oh! It's you! You've finally come! The blimp crash survivor! I saw your picture in the Tarantian! I am Alexander, First Acolyte of the Temple! It's a great honor to meet you!"

Bloody hell, who hasn't seen that damned picture by now? Did they place orders for back-issues after Caladon joined the Unified Kingdoms, or did that bastard editor re-run my story in light of the wider audience? "What? What are you talking about?" It worked on other people, perhaps it would work on the great First Acolyte. I could hope.

He didn't calm down in the slightest. "Do you have any idea what that means? It's you! You're the Living One! It's a miracle...!"

I held up my hand defensively. *Keep it down, will you?!* "Let's not blow this out of proportion..."

Still, it seemed like nothing I said could get him to just let it go, even for a second. "Out of proportion? This is an astronomical event! The return of Nasrudin! The final battle! The end of all we know, and a new beginning! The most amazing...!"

I growled at him loudly, "Fine! I'm the Living One! Do as I say, and

shut up!" It was harsh, but I really couldn't stand all of the excited babbling. If he kept it up who knows who would overhear. I really didn't feel comfortable being worshipped, and the fellows I now shared my company with would likely be ten times worse than Virgil ever had been.

"Yes, of course."

He composes himself, but just barely.

"Forgive my excitement, exalted one. We have waited for you for a long time..."

I sighed, feeling somewhat guilty for my outburst. I just didn't want all of the added attention. I only wanted answers. "Let's keep this between us..."

"Of course!" *Well, I'm glad we're finally seeing eye-to-eye then.* "But you must listen to me... we were warned by the high priest to expect your arrival. And he told us to scorn you as an imposter. For some reason, he refuses to believe..."

I scoffed, "I can understand his position... the whole thing is a bit odd..." *Really, now... falling all over me just because I survived a blimp crash. The prophecies really don't mention a blimp.*

Alexander actually laughed when I said that. "There are times when all of us find it difficult to follow the path chosen for us. In the end... does it really matter if you were or you weren't? You seem intent on discovering what has happened, and already you and Arronax have crossed paths. If you thwart his plan, you will have played the ROLE of the Living One. Is there any difference in the end?"

Hmph... so you know of my encounter with Arronax. Somebody's been speaking with Joachim. Regardless of the separate conclusions we arrived at, Alexander and I did seem to agree on one thing: the prophecy didn't matter one way or another. "I suppose not. I still don't think I'll be able to face any ancient evils, however."

"I'm not worried. You've come this far... regardless of what you think, I feel that fate has chosen you as its champion."

Hmm... well, the more information the better. I ought to get what I can. "What can I expect from people around here?"

He thought about my question quite honestly, doing his best to tell me anything useful. I honestly appreciated the effort. "You should be very careful about who you reveal yourself to. If you speak with Hadrian the archaeologist, you may not want to tell him - he's a great man of faith, but he is old; belief in you will come slowly. Gunther Wilhelm is a brilliant man, and open to new ideas... I believe he will accept you immediately."

Now that was actually quite useful. So I'll get more out of Hadrian if I lie to him, and more out of Gunther if I convince him I'm a god... by which I mean lying to him. Funny how that works. "Thank you, I'll remember that. What else can you tell me about these two gentlemen?"

Naturally, Alexander was all too happy to continue answering my questions. I almost felt like I was abusing his good-natured trust, but it's not as though I tried convincing him I was the Living One. He came to that conclusion on his own. "Well, Hadrian is the church archaeologist, and Gunther Wilhelm is the church historian. Both are well versed in Panarii history, and have detailed information concerning their specific disciplines."

Sounds like they'd be worth chatting up if I want to get more information about all of this business. "Where might I find them?"

"Both of them have offices just through those doors behind me. When we're finished speaking I will open the doors for you."

I was rather starting to like this Alexander fellow. I decided to try my luck and ask him about the one thing I'd arrived for. If I were truly lucky, he might be able to direct me to just the proper place and I'd be done almost before I began. "Say, while I'm asking questions, could I ask you a bit about Nasrudin?"

He nodded, excited to continue speaking with me for as long as I would tolerate him. That only made me even more uncomfortable. "Sure. What would you like to know?"

Well if this isn't going to sound odd... but I suppose I have to ask somebody. "Where is he now?"

Alexander seemed unsure at first, but when he saw just how directly I meant the question he shifted quite rapidly to a rather sad look. I felt

bad again for asking. "Nasrudin has been dead for more than 2,000 years."

Yes, yes, I know that... damned Silver Lady and her cryptic messages.

"How did he die?" I was growing desperate for any kind of information I could get. Who knew what would be significant and what wouldn't? Not even the Silver Lady, likely.

"Nasrudin died after he and the council banished Arronax at the Ring of Brodgar. Nasrudin was wounded mortally in the battle which preceded the banishment and died shortly after."

Might as well go for the complete package. "Where did he die?" If Alexander was put off by just how forward I was being, he didn't show it in the slightest. Reverence had its uses, I supposed.

"According to the Archaeon," Alexander started quoting the book perfectly from his memory. It was a little bit off-putting, but at least he was telling me what I wanted to know, "...Nasrudin traveled to the southernmost tip of the land, and there laid himself to rest." He looked at me, gauging my response before continuing. "That is why we are here... this temple is built over his remains."

Well... that's a bit... dark. Also, helpful. I've got to get ahold of those. Ugh, I can't believe I'm doing this. "Oh, really? And where might I find these remains?" I could hear Virgil sighing discontentedly behind me, already well aware of what I was thinking. *Well, I suppose there are still some things that bother him after all.*

"The remains of Nasrudin are just below us, in the lower catacombs. There's a stairway through the doors behind me. It leads down to the burial chamber and the sarcophagus in which he lies encased. Unfortunately, only acolytes and pilgrims are allowed to see the remains..."

Hmm... that might prove difficult. Perhaps either that Hadrian or that Gunther fellow will be able to help me out. "Thank you for the information, Alexander. I'll be going now." He smiled, bowing to me lightly, and opened the doors to the hallway behind him.

My only hope was that I could fool one of the other members of the church into allowing me to desecrate the mortal remains of their

beloved god. My task was certainly laid out before me.

Chapter the Fifty Sixth: Lessons of a Religious Nature

I strolled confidently into the hallway that Alexander had opened the way to. *All right... time to turn on the charm. They're going to have to like me an awful lot before they say, 'Sure! Go right ahead, defile the remains of our dead god!'* I wandered down the first hallway until it led to a second, and then I was faced with two rooms, one on my left and one on my right. For the time being I chose the room on the right.

Inside there was a thin man, properly dressed in a finely-made suit. He stared at me over a pair of thin, gold-rimmed spectacles lying across his nose. He rose from his desk to speak with me, but his voice was soft and gentle, barely above a whisper, "Yes? What is it, daughter?"

Now that's not something I've really ever heard anybody call me. For some reason, the man's greeting made me warm up to him instantly. "Greetings. And who are you, sir?"

He walked around his desk to approach me more properly. His features and mannerisms were very delicate, but his eyes belied a strength of body and character, as well as harboring a fierce intelligence. He regarded me intensely, but when he reached out to shake my hand he was nothing but gentle. "I am Willhelm. Gunther Willhelm."

I smiled at him sweetly, trying to make a good impression. "A pleasure, sir. What exactly do you do here?"

"I'm the church historian. I have a variety of responsibilities: from translations to document restorations, as well as authentication of any literary finds. If it's written and it has to do with the Panarii, it's my job to know about it. Does that answer your question?"

"Yes, and very well." Pretending to like this man was going to be a

great deal easier than I'd expected. I had been fearing a religious nut, and instead I found a kind-hearted man of intellect and education. My opinion of the Panarii was rapidly improving. *Why can't all of them be like this?* "Would you mind telling me of some of your work?"

He relaxed visibly as he stood there, warming to my presence as I expressed more interest in his vocation. I felt bad since I was really just intending on buttering him up, but I was also genuinely curious. He positively fascinated me. "What about my work are you interested in?"

Might as well start at the top, I suppose. At least I won't be bored. "What are you currently working on?"

He motioned to some books on his desk, quickly and precisely. I was enthralled by the man's sheer presence. "Currently, I am doing some research on older translations of the Archaeon... I have found some interesting discrepancies that I am looking into..."

I could tell something was bothering him about that thought, and he certainly wasn't a man who was easily bothered. "Discrepancies? What do you mean?" I felt as though I might be overstepping my bounds, but I just wouldn't be myself if I didn't toe the line between curiosity and decency.

"There are a few differences in some of the passages that I've found in this earlier copy. I'll give you an example: the Archaeon we read today refers to our order as the "Panarii." The word "Panarii" in the old tongue means "light servant" or "follower." But in this older copy I'm studying, we are referred to as the "Pan-Arnes," which means "defender of the gate." Very odd..."

I was more intrigued that he would be so incredibly hung up over such a seemingly trivial difference, but also I felt that if it was important to him perhaps there really was something worth being troubled over. "Interesting. Was there anything else?" I practically hung on his every word.

Unfortunately for me, he seemed uninterested in continuing that line of thought. At the very least he was direct and honest about it. "A few minor things... I'm still working on the translation. Perhaps it's something we can speak of later..."

"Of course." I smiled politely, trying desperately not to offend him.
"Could I ask you about the statue in the courtyard... who is that?"

The sudden shift in topic didn't even slow him down. "That statue is of Saint Mannox... one of the early Elders of the church."

"Why was he made a saint?" I was glad that Gunther didn't seem to be terribly bothered by my incessant questioning. It certainly beat talking about myself... that was one subject that was off limits, no matter how intrigued I was by the man in front of me.

"Saint Mannox was the only person REPUTEDLY"

He looks at me over his spectacles

"to have ascended. That is, the spirit of Nasrudin appeared and took his body directly from this plane of existence to the next."

There was a strong emphasis in his voice, so incredibly obvious that I knew something not only bothered him about what he'd said, but it was something he'd wanted me to pick up on. "You say 'reputedly', Gunther. Do you not believe?"

He smiled at me, obviously pleased that I did pick up on his hinting. I'd have had to be a simpleton not to. At any rate, I certainly wasn't one to stop him from saying his mind. "There is no doubt in my mind that Mannox was a very holy man. My belief in an inconclusive set of circumstances does not invalidate that fact, regardless of how that might reflect on my own faith..."

Hmm... as interesting as this religion business is turning out to be, I can't say I disagree with Gunther here. "Were there any eye witnesses to the event?"

As always, he was exceptionally forthcoming with information.

"There were two eye-witnesses to the ascension of Mannox - two elves. One was named R'aan-Dar, and the other... what was his name... K'an Hua, I believe. Their accounts of the incident were almost exactly the same, and both were beautifully written." That he maintained such doubt in the face of everything he knew only impressed me further. I could always appreciate a good skeptic. Frederick had been that way, too... *Gods, will I never stop being reminded of him...?*

Although I was on a subject far from the one I eventually wanted to broach, talking about Mannox seemed like a valuable way to build up some small amount of trust with Gunther. It was difficult for me to determine exactly what he thought of me, and I couldn't be too careful. "What else do you know about Mannox?" Nevermind that the subject simply interested me from a purely educational point of view. "Almost all of the records concerning the life of the Great Saint have been lost over the years. Very little is known about him, or what he did before he was, ahem... taken."

A slight smirk.

"Of course there are the usual insubstantial accounts of miracles."

He seems to remember himself, straightening.

"And, of course, there is Alexander."

Alexander? Now that's new, is there something that excited fellow failed to mention to me? "What do you mean? What does Alexander have to do with him?"

For once, Gunther almost seemed surprised. Not quite, but at the very least it was close. "You haven't heard? He almost never speaks of it... the man has enough humility for all of us." Gunther shook his head with a stunned respect before continuing, "Alexander is a direct descendant of Mannox... his family has held the position of First Acolyte for the last 1500 years..."

It seemed like Virgil's impression of the man wasn't entirely undeserved after all. If the two men I'd met so far were such amazing people, I wondered what that Hadrian fellow would be like. I suspected he would, at the very least, be likeable. "No... I didn't know that. That's quite a legacy."

"Yes, it is." Gunther nodded satisfactorily. "And there's no better man to bear it - Alexander is a saint in his own right. There are few men I respect, my friend. Alexander is a noble soul... do you know anything of him?"

I can see that your respect would be a rather difficult thing to gain. "No. Tell me of him..." I was really growing to like these Panarii fellows. First Virgil, then Joachim, and now the prominent members of the

church itself... what kind of a religion could possibly have so many interesting, noble, and mostly rational people? Perhaps being the Living One wasn't such a curse after all. *Hah, surely... that'll be the day. I can only tolerate so much worship. I used to be a whore for heaven's sake.*

"Alexander hasn't always been with us here at the Temple. You see, the First Acolyte's role in any Panarii temple is as spiritual leader AND warrior. Symbolically he is to assume these roles just as Nasrudin did so many years ago. Most Acolytes go into this very lightly; they might entreat the local constabulary to train them in basic combat techniques. Not so Alexander."

"What did he do?" It was an awful lot easier to respect a man who knew how to defend himself when things got rough. I found my respect growing for Alexander as well, the more that I heard about him.

Gunther's tone was deadly serious. "Alexander left us for 10 years, and studied with some of the most feared and respected masters in several combat disciplines. For his pilgrimage, he traveled to the Vendigroth wastes, and lived there, alone, until he thought himself ready to assume his post. If you know nothing of the Wastes, know this. There's no more terrible place in all of Arcanum..."

I did know of the wastes, actually, and Gunther wasn't far off in his impression of them. They were a very harsh place to be, indeed, and I respected Alexander for his bravery and commitment. He was likely at least my equal in combat, and I was certainly no slouch. I'd killed the master of melee in close combat, and he with a poisoned blade. "So he is a skilled warrior?"

Gunther grinned at me assuredly. I could hear the sheer respect in his voice. It wasn't reverence or adulation, but simple, honest respect, from a man who was rather deserving of such a thing in his own right. "There's not a more dangerous man in all of Caladon. And he's very well-versed in two or three of the magick colleges as well, as are all of us who are Panarii elders. The Temple hasn't been in safer hands since it was in those of the Great Saint himself..."

Oddly enough, that's somewhat less comforting considering that I need to desecrate the grave it's built on. It did strike me as odd that I felt some

degree of comfort in the temple despite my technological inclination, but I wrote it off as my demeanor simply being more potent now than it ever had been. I pushed those thoughts away, trying to remain focused... it was time to ask the truly important question. "Say, Gunther, you're a historian... what do you know about the remains of Nasrudin?"

"Me? I know very little about the remains, save for the documents we have associated with their discovery and a few research documents about the sarcophagus itself. Hadrian, the archaeologist, would have more information about the specifics."

I'm not so ready to throw this entire conversation out the window just yet... you've got to have something useful to say. Perhaps if I could convince you that they're fake... "Do you think that they are authentic?" The more I thought about it, the better I felt about that plan. It seemed like a rather insidious way of getting in to see them.

He suddenly got a very serious look on his face and lowered his voice noticeably. "To tell you the truth, I really don't know. I've done a lot of research into the engravings on the sarcophagus... everything seems to be in order... it just seems to me that it's all very convenient. I mean, who buried him? We have no records of that. There's no doubt that an elf of his stature would have been given an elaborate burial, but who did it? We don't know..."

I knew I was on to something. If I could get Gunther's support I would suddenly be much closer to discovering whatever it was I needed to discover. *Damn you, Silver Lady... why must you always be so damned cryptic?* "Do the church records say who discovered them?"

After only a moment's thought he nodded, "Yes... let me see." He turned and walked over to a bookshelf, pulling a weathered old tome from off of it without even hesitating to look for where it was. He was obviously a very meticulously organized man. "Ah... here we are. The elf's name was K'an Hua."

"Wasn't the person who witnessed the ascension named K'an Hua?" *Come now... that's enough to doubt, isn't it? You'll let me in to see the remains now?* I knew it wouldn't quite be that easy, but my apprehension made me a bit eager.

"Why, yes... it's at least the same area. Let me look at the years... the discovery of the remains happened within a few years of the ascension of Saint Mannox. I never realized that, but you're correct. That very well might have been the same person."

I became a bit overzealous then, pushing him a bit harder than I ought to have. "Don't you find that strange? Perhaps a little convenient?"

He sat down on the edge of his desk and gave me a rather stern look. I swallowed uncomfortably, knowing I'd messed up. "You're very curious about this whole affair, my friend. What is your real interest in this?"

Bloody hell! I grew nervous, but I tried to calm myself down. Alexander had said Gunther would accept me if I told him I was the Living One, and I could get into an awful lot of trouble if I wasn't willing to go down that path. I sighed and stared at him levelly, "It's a long tale..."

Gunther listened patiently, and intently, curious about exactly where I was going with it. I didn't outright mention that I was the Living One, but I did make sure to mention the zeppelin crash. I tried to mention it offhand, pretending that it wasn't the entire reason for me to tell the story in the first place. If it didn't seem like I was trying to force a reaction out of him I suspected he would be a lot more receptive to the idea.

When I was finally finished he nodded emphatically and spoke. "I see," his gaze was harsh and calculating, and he studied me thoroughly. "You're telling me that YOU are the sole survivor of the I.F.S. Zephyr blimp crash?"

I sighed, nodding. "Yes." *If you believe anything that I say, please at least believe the things that are true...*

Gunther is silent for a long while. Then a slight smile comes over his face, and he takes my hand in his.

"I was wondering when you were going to tell me. I've been looking for you for a long time, you know. The rumors abound, and we'd heard you might soon be calling. I'm so very glad you've decided to put your trust in me..."

I sighed again, but this time in relief. I smiled at him and even blushed slightly. Being worshipped still didn't feel right, especially not coming from him. "Thank you, Gunther." *Well, I suppose nothing is stopping me from being direct about it now.* "I really need to see those remains..."

He thought about what I said for a moment, carefully wording his response. "Listen, my friend, not everyone here is sympathetic to your cause. Hadrian the archaeologist is the one who you need to speak with, but be very careful... he's an old and loyal friend, but belief in you will come slowly for him. He will be the best source of information regarding the remains and how you might see them, but tread lightly... subterfuge might be necessary."

First Alexander says not to tell him, and now Gunther suggests subterfuge... if there's one thing I can do, it's lie through my bloody teeth. Hadrian won't know what hit him. "I'll remember that, Gunther. Thank you for your help."

He shook his head, and my hand. "No... thank you, my friend. Return here when you've seen the remains and tell me what you find... I may be able to help you once you know what it is you're looking for."

I smiled, pleased at how my conversation with Gunther had gone. He was a good man, and now one that I could seemingly call friend. "I will, Gunther. Good bye."

I left Gunther's office, walking across the narrow hallway to the room on the other side. The first thing I noticed when I entered were several glass display cases containing various oddities. I didn't recognize two of them, but the one on the far left certainly got my attention. It looked like it was made out of a strange purple and blue hued glass, and the shape was unmistakable. It had to be the key to the Iron Clan.

"Yes? What is it?" The wizened old gnome in the room addressed me. He had wildish gray hair and a scraggly beard that looked more like he'd forgotten to shave than any kind of intentional growth.

I certainly didn't want to just barge in and ask him for one of the

obviously valuable artifacts behind him, and it seemed like he was probably the man I was looking for anyway. "Hello. And who might you be?"

He looked up at me with a toothless grin. "Call me Hadrian! Acolyte of the Panarii, and the local expert on church archaeology. How might I help you today?"

"Greetings." I smiled and reached down to shake his hand. "I'm Samantha Colburn." I waited for the memories of being teased to come, but for some reason they didn't. Perhaps I was finally starting to leave behind that unfortunate bit of my past, or perhaps the troubles in my present bothered me now far more than my past ever did. *Frederick*... I shook off my train of thought and focused further on what was immediately in front of me. "Can I ask you about the objects you have here, Hadrian?"

"Which would you like to know about?"

I was already being quite direct enough, I didn't want to go straight for the goal. Either of them, really. "What is that? A skeleton's finger?"

Hadrian nodded proudly, "Yes... that is the Finger of Saint Mannox."

Somehow that hadn't really been the answer I was expecting. "His finger? Why is that here?" Storing the lopped off finger of a revered religious figure seemed like a rather twisted way to worship him. Maybe I stood a good chance at getting a look at old Nasrudin's bones after all.

My confusion didn't put Hadrian off in the slightest, however. He seemed all too happy just to have somebody to chat with. I had to imagine it probably got quite lonely. "Legend tells of a time when Saint Mannox had been captured by barbarians... they were plundering the surrounding countryside, and were holding Mannox for ransom. He told his people to refuse, so the barbarians threatened to cut off one of his fingers if he didn't comply. Mannox calmly picked up a knife, told them there would be no ransom, and cut it off himself."

I shuddered uncontrollably at that thought. I could never imagine

doing such a thing, or even bearing witness to it. "He sounds like a hard man..."

Hadrian shrugged, considerably less interested in the man than he was interested in the man's remains. "Yes, he was when he needed to be. Is there anything else you'd like to know?"

Well, I already know much of Mannox anyhow. "Could you tell me about that black gem you have over there?"

His voice was almost distant, and it seemed like for all his initial excitement to speak with me I was now dreadfully boring him by dwelling on his artifacts. It seemed like he'd mostly lost interest in them after having initially studied them. I supposed that would be the way of a true archaeologist, though... always looking for new things to study while losing interest in the old. It wasn't any fun anymore when you already knew about it. "That is the eye of Kraka-tur," he said disinterestedly.

Funny name for a rock. "Really? It's a beautiful stone..."

"No... I mean it's REALLY the eye of Kraka-tur! When the council was banishing him, he put up quite a struggle. Somehow the monster's eye got put out, and someone found it as they were cleaning up. Dreadful creature, Kraka-tur was. If you ask Alexander about who's been banished over the years, he'll tell you the story..."

I think I already need to know everything I ever wanted to know on that subject. I patted the journal in my purse lightly, still proud at having acquired it, yet sad at the same time for no longer having anybody to share it with. Hadrian didn't really count, as much as I was inclined to like the small fellow. "Can you tell me about that strange, glass device?"

He actually laughed a bit, a good-natured laugh. "We don't have any idea what that is... it sure is pretty, though, eh?"

But I know...! I know what it is, dammit! "Is it for sale?"

A look of sudden horror crossed his eyes. *Oops.* "No... no... these are priceless church artifacts. I couldn't part with them for worldly

riches."

I felt bad about it, but a plan was already forming in my mind for how to go about stealing that device behind Hadrian's back. He wasn't a bad little gnome, but I wasn't going to take no for an answer. It would certainly require a great deal of thought before I went about actually putting any plan into action, however. I had other business to attend to first at any rate. "You said you were an archaeologist... have you seen the remains of Nasrudin?"

His brow furrows.

"No, and I'd do anything to see those old bones of his! There are so many questions I could answer if I could only have a look at them! When he died, how he died... I want to know if his skeletal structure is the same as common elves, or if his prolonged use of powerful magicks changed him somehow... so many questions! And I've never been able to see them!"

It seemed like old Hadrian wasn't going to need much coaxing after all. I supposed asking the right questions went a long way towards finding the right answers. I tried pushing him a little further, letting him continue on his tirade and hoping it lead somewhere lucrative for me. "Why, Hadrian? You're the church archaeologist, Surely you-

Hadrian rather suddenly cut me off, his anger apparent, though not directed at me. "Yes, you'd think so, wouldn't you, young lady!" He got up off of his tiny chair and started wildly gesticulating to and fro. "I mean, when the Elders need someone digging in the dank caverns of the Bangellian Deeps, who do they call upon? Or if some poor fool comes across a tomb sealed with a Gorgothian blood-curse? Ring the bell for Old Hadrian!"

Yes, that's right... get as worked up about it as you like. "But why won't they let you see the remains, Hadrian?" For the life of me I couldn't help continuing to push him, but at least there was a purpose behind it.

"I've no idea!"

He throws his hands in the air, upending a stack of papers and what looks to be a cup of dark ale.

"They speak of desecration and sacrilege, but..."

He lowers his voice, leaning forward.

"...he is only DEAD. respect and cherish Nasrudin and what he taught

us more than anyone, but I hardly think he'd be upset if I chipped a piece of bone from his earthly shell."

It seemed like the moment was at hand to tip the scales in my favor. If Hadrian was ever going to be receptive to my needs now would be the time, and I wasn't going to squander the opportunity. "I see your point. I, myself, would love to take a look at them..."

"Really?" His face lit up happily and I knew I was on the right track. "Are you a fellow archaeologist, my friend?" *Splendid! My timing couldn't have been more perfect... I've just got to keep this going.*

"Uh... yes. Yes I am." The lie formed slowly at first, then grew into something I could be more confident in. "Strictly freelance, of course..." I didn't want him asking any questions about organizations I didn't know the first thing about. Technically, I could consider myself a freelance archaeologist of sorts... I did tend to acquire a great number of curiosities and oddities while digging through ancient tombs and dungeons. It wasn't entirely a lie.

I could see the idea forming in his head, and I liked very much where it was leading. "Y-y-e-s-s..." He looked me over a bit, considering me and measuring my words. "You do seem to have that particular look about you. Probably a little dirt under those fingernails, eh? Well met! And what interest do you have in the remains of Nasrudin...?"

"Well," I paid careful attention to the tone of my voice, speaking quietly to impart the sense of secrecy that would lend appropriate veracity to my tale, "I'm thinking of converting, but I need a little proof..." *All right... NOW I'm lying.*

He looks at me winking.

"I understand, my friend. Faith is a wonderful thing... especially when backed up by some good, hard evidence."

He laughs, rummaging around on his desk.

"I've made a few notes over the years about the sarcophagus... here we are."

Oh, yes... do tell, do tell indeed... "What do you know, Hadrian?"

He shuffled through the papers, reading off bits and supplementing them with his own thoughts. "Let's see... standard information. The

stone is of the local area, there are elven characters naming it as the final resting place of Nasrudin... the design is Old Elven, consistent with the latter end of the Age of Legends... rune work is exquisite, although perhaps a bit overdone, in my opinion. Of course, I'm more of a conservative..."

"But you've never seen the inside." I cut to the heart of the matter. "Has anyone?" *Come on, Hadrian... you know you want to...*

He shrugged suggestively, "As far as I know, no one has ever broken the seal on the sarcophagus..." His tone was high and curious, pleading me to continue. It seemed like my goal was all but accomplished.

Of course, I was only too happy to oblige. "Interesting. I'd REALLY like to see what's in there, Hadrian..."

He leaned in closer and I did the same. His voice was barely a whisper then, almost impossible to hear even with my ear less than a foot from his mouth. "Just how much do you want to see them, my friend?"

I winked at him, nodding emphatically, "VERY much." Guilt struck out at me yet again, but I pushed it down. I didn't really have any other choice, and if abusing the good nature of a kind old gnome was the only way to put a stop to Arronax's return then I would just have to do that. *Sorry, old chap... it's nothing personal, I assure you.*

"I see."

He looks around furtively.

"Look, I'm an important member of this church... my face is well known. I can't exactly be running around and defacing sacred church artifacts."

He laughs.

"But were I to have an accomplice, we might be able to get in and get out without anyone being the wiser..."

Oh yes, I hoped that was where you were going with this... I like where this is going quite a bit... "I'm listening..."

He continued whispering his plan to me, "The tomb lies within the

old catacombs, and the entrance to the burial room is well guarded. BUT! About a year ago I was perusing the pages of one of our ancient texts, and within its pages I found an old illustration of the catacombs, drawn by the first keeper of the crypt, apparently for his own use in navigating them...

All of the connecting passages into the burial room were walled off soon after the discovery. All except for one! There is a passageway which comes up through the floor, and it's so well hidden in the stonework that its been missed all of these years! I've shared this information with no one... you and I are the only living souls who know of its existence..."

I nodded along with him as he spoke, encouraging him to trust me further. "That's fascinating, and I think I see where your plan is going..."

"Good. Here's what needs to be done. Enter the sewers through the grating just in front of the Temple... when you've entered, you will be in a small room. There is a crack in the wall... it leads to the old catacombs beneath the temple. Enter them..."

He paused, listening carefully to the footsteps of the guard passing just outside of his room. I waited for them to pass and then encouraged him to continue, "And then?"

Once he was satisfied that the guard was far enough away he continued whispering at me furiously. "You will find yourself in a passageway... when it comes to an end, you will see a door in the wall. Speak the word 'Crimstone' to it, and it will open for you. Through that door is a passage which leads to a staircase. That staircase leads to the tomb of Nasrudin."

It seemed like my deception had been a rather successful one. I knew Hadrian would keep quiet about what he'd just told me, and nobody else could really stop me anymore. It looked as though I would be able to poke at the remains of Nasrudin after all. Where the Silver Lady expected that to lead me I had no idea. "Is there anything else I need to know?"

He nodded, continuing his whispers, "Once you've entered the catacombs, you will see adjoining passages as well. DON'T enter

them. They are full of dark spirits and other creatures... if you wish to avoid them, go straight through the door and up into the burial room..."

Yes, I think I'd rather like to avoid tangling with the undead even more than I already have. They're not exactly friendly, on average. "I'll remember that. Thank you, Hadrian."

"My pleasure."

He winks.

"Return to me with whatever you find. If possible, bring me a piece of the skeleton... I'd enjoy being able to finally get a look at it. Together, we'll see what old Nasrudin has to tell us..."

That certainly sounded like as good of an idea as any. I failed to see how else I could get any information out of a 2,000 year old skeleton buried in a sealed coffin. I was no necromancer, and I found associating with them... distasteful. My thoughts returned to that pompous windbag Geoffrey whom I'd helped out way back in Ashbury. *Ugh... once a bastard always a bastard.* "I'll return when I've accomplished this..."

Hadrian winked at me and smiled broadly, "You do that, my friend."

I turned and left Hadrian's room, making my way from there out to the front of the temple. *Well, I certainly got the information I came for... I wish I could say I was looking forward to actually using it. What exactly is it you've got to tell me, Nasrudin old boy?* I shuddered, wondering if the latent magickal energy from such a powerful elf would be enough to rouse his bones into a state of undeath. I did not relish the idea of fighting an undead Nasrudin, that was for sure. There was also the small matter of potentially being caught, as the majority of the Panarii would most certainly frown on my behavior... not the least of which would be the High Priest, who felt me an impostor as it was.

I'd simply have to not get caught, then.

Chapter the Fifty Seventh:

Mysteries of Legend

The main sewers were just as dank and miserable as the old sewers had been when I'd sought out and destroyed L'anelach for his savagery. I heard movement in the distance, heavy footsteps in shallow waters. The growls and moans that issued forth along with them only confirmed my suspicions that the sewers were one place I absolutely did not want to be.

Thankfully, Hadrian's directions were quite accurate. I could tell he'd been studying this plan of his for some time, possibly to have a go at it himself when he suspected nobody was looking. Then I just happened along, a willing accomplice... *how utterly convenient of me*. I slipped into the crack in the wall and stepped onto smooth, dry stone. I was in a narrow hallway that lead down past several passageways and into a wider room. Taking Hadrian's advice yet again, I elected to ignore the side passages.

My footsteps echoed intermittently off of the smoothly carved walls as I stalked down the passageway. I could see several massive, lit braziers in the room up ahead and, past them, a thick, stone door. I walked into the room unhesitatingly, keeping a close eye on the side halls that I walked past. As I approached the door I noticed letters carved into it, and I stopped in the center of the four braziers to read the letters carefully before proceeding.

Virgil took that opportunity of my apparent hesitation to voice his disapproval. "Samantha, are you really sure about this? Do you think desecrating Nasrudin's grave is really going to do you any good?"

I shrugged, "I've no clue, all I have to go on is what the Silver Lady told me. Oh, that's right... you weren't with us at the time. The Silver Lady said 'Your answer lies with Nasrudin'. Being who she is, she had

to know where her words would lead me... I have to assume this is what she intended."

He shook his head, "Well, I still don't like it... but you do have a point. If that is what the Silver Lady told you, I certainly don't have any better ideas. Please, carry on."

Sebastian clapped him on the shoulder and grinned, "Now that's the spirit! I was beginning to wonder where your good, old fashioned sense of curiosity was."

Virgil laughed half-heartedly. Vollinger tried to make him feel better, "Let me assure you, there were no riddles other than the obvious. There is, unfortunately, little room for doubt. Let us just try our best not to get caught." I looked at Vollinger uncomfortably as he talked, still not quite sure what to do about him. *Well... he's loyal NOW at least... it's so hard to ignore what he did... but... it may be even harder to ask him to leave.*

"All right, all right..." Virgil relented, "I suppose it really can't be helped. I'll trust in what the Silver Lady had to say, and in Samantha to make the best of a bad situation."

I shook off my thoughts of Vollinger for the time being and responded as cheerily as I could muster, "Right! As for this door... it says, 'Knock no more times than three, if ye have not the key.' Well, the key is 'CRIMSTONE', right? So we should knock?"

Sebastian shrugged, "Sounds like a fine idea to me."

I walked up to the door and gave it a good knocking.

Son of a bitch! As soon as the third knock landed on the door I could hear a loud, spectral moaning. Several shapes shimmered into being in the air around me, forming into ghostly suits of armor carrying massive, two-handed swords. They struck at me as they formed, and I was woefully unprepared for their assault. They tore into me mercilessly, spilling dreadful amounts of my own blood onto the floor.

"Samantha!" Virgil shouted, pulling his axe free and laying into one of the ghosts. Terry snarled and leapt at one, scoring a good blow on the bastard's shoulder and clinging on persistently. He gnawed at it for several moments before finally taking it down. I wasn't particularly surprised that Terry was the first of us to kill one of the blasted things. Vollinger's gun rang out, and I realized that, despite my reservations about having him along, it was a sound I almost welcomed. *Well, I suppose he traveled with me as a spy for years, there's no harm in letting him continue along now. I'll just have to keep him at an arm's length.* Sebastian's gun issued forth a thick ball of green energy which struck the ghost closest to me squarely in the chest, knocking it backwards and filling the room with the sound of an enormous bang.

I guess it can't be helped. If anybody's paying attention to this old passage they'll surely know we're here now. I regained my composure and lifted my axe menacingly. The ghosts, undaunted, cut into me yet again. I was better prepared and I dodged out of the way, but I was also surrounded. I had no room to maneuver, and for each sword that I spun away from I ran right into another.

I swung my axe feebly, striking one of the ghosts in the abdomen. It wailed, though it seemed more a wail of anger than pain, and it struck out at me again, piercing my shoulder straight through. I cried out in pain, having fallen far from the brave woman I pretended to be. I looked down and I saw so much blood... so much blood...
Nathaniel...

Virgil tried to cast a healing spell, but it fizzled almost as soon as he started casting it. "No!" He shouted, growing worried as my grip on my axe weakened. He swung his own axe about in a fury, toppling one of my ghostly assailants. Sebastian's gun shot forth another ball of green energy, sending a second ghost sprawling. Terry leapt upon it, chewing viciously at the armor covering its throat until at last its unearthly wails ceased.

Vollinger aimed his gun carefully and pulled the trigger, but instead of the familiar bang that I was accustomed to I heard only a click. He swore under his breath and ran forward, swinging his rifle around

and smashing one of the ghosts in the back of the head. It turned angrily in response, and I took that chance to land a strike of my own. I was most in my element when facing my opponent's back, and even when fighting the undead it was no exception. I swung my axe with the last of my strength, cleaving the damned specter across the back of his neck. I could feel his brittle armor cracking beneath my unexpected assault, and at last he slumped forward, unmoving.

In my haste to take advantage of the situation I'd carelessly forgotten about the fifth warrior that yet remained. I could feel the point of his blade piercing my own back suddenly, twisting, and tearing the flesh out of my side. I fell to the ground, lying in a pool of my own blood, too weak to even hold my axe any longer.

The battle raged on above me even after I fell to the ground. With the ghost distracted I shakily reached a bloody hand into my purse and pulled out a healing salve, applying it to my most serious of wounds. My technological demeanor was so strong at that point that the wound began to close up near immediately. I started to breathe easier as I felt the life flowing back into me, the salve acting almost like magick in its own right. I heard the remaining ghost clatter to the floor as I pulled another salve from my purse, desperately applying it to the other, numerous cuts and slashes on my body.

Virgil knelt down next to me nervously, "Samantha, by the gods, are you all right?"

"I'm going to live, if that's what you mean." I pulled another salve out of my purse and continued applying it to the wounds that hurt the worst. "...but it was fairly close. If it weren't for the lot of you, I'd be dead for sure."

Sebastian grinned down at me, "Hey, that's what we're here for, ain't it? You always charge in and bring everything down before I can hardly get a shot off half the time... it feels good to finally be able to help out for once."

I chuckled weakly, starting to feel better quite rapidly now that I had the aid of many salves, "Well, thanks. I think it's about time we followed Hadrian's instructions instead of making up our own, don't

you think? Perhaps I ought to speak the damned key aloud?"

Vollinger started chuckling, too, "That would make quite a bit of sense, wouldn't it?"

I slowly climbed to my feet with Virgil's help and stared at the door hatefully.

"CRIMSTONE."

A heavy grinding sound started to issue forth from the door and, slowly, it retracted into the wall. I brushed my dress off and reached into my purse for another salve, gently applying it as I walked past another set of four lit braziers. Past even those braziers was an obviously hidden passage in the wall. From the side I was on I could push it open and enter the dimly lit chamber beyond, but once I was on the other side I could scarcely make it out. If I hadn't known it was there I never would've been able to find my way out.

Inside the darkened chamber was a heavy, stone sarcophagus, exactly as it had been described to me. It was covered in runes and carvings on all sides, and looked to be centuries old. I glanced briefly at each of my companions, all of them nodding in turn. Even Terry gave a muffled woof and I patted him on the head lightly. I gripped the edge of the sarcophagus lid tightly and, with Virgil's and Sebastian's help, we quietly shoved the lid off and gently set it on the ground.

The skeleton inside of the sarcophagus was dressed in ragged robes that had somehow managed not to completely rot away over the years. I couldn't bear to chip off a piece of it as Hadrian had asked of me, so I simply reached inside and plucked out the whole damned skull, wincing at what exactly I was doing. I stuffed it into my purse quietly, my heartbeat growing faster as I grew more and more nervous. *If I don't hurry the hell up somebody is going to get suspicious and discover me down here.*

I took in the grim scene and noted that the skeleton was missing a finger on its right hand. Although I should've become terribly suspicious, I was so nervous I failed to realize the potential significance of that fact. Instead, I became distracted by the blood on the inside of the sarcophagus lid. *Blood? What sort of madness is this?!*



It looked like a diagram and a message of some sort, written in blood... likely the blood of the sarcophagus' unfortunate occupant. I suddenly grew very sick, trying not to think of what exactly that implied. I was too nervous and too bloody ill to make sense of the broken ring or the message underneath it, but I committed both to my journal as quickly as I could and then I got the hell out of there, sealing up the secret passage once again after I'd passed back through

it.

Virgil was quite obviously stunned, "I... what does this mean...? What exactly happened?"

"I don't know, Virgil," I tried to comfort him, although I wasn't doing a terribly good job of it. "Perhaps this is what the Silver Lady wanted us to find. Don't you think that if we get to the bottom of this we'll learn something about Arronax?"

He nodded, "I suppose you're right. There does seem to be something afoot here, and I feel a lot better about trying to find out what than I would about just sitting idly by."

We passed back through the now-empty doorway and the fading ghostly shells that had very nearly killed me on the way in. Still electing to ignore the side passageways, especially given my still quite painful wounds, we progressed back into the sewers and from there out towards the front of the temple. I nervously pushed the temple doors aside, nodding at Alexander nervously as I passed back by him on my way into the back hallway. I first stepped into Hadrian's room, a grave look upon my face.

My nerves had calmed a bit from when I was in the burial chamber and, spying the skeletal finger on the far side of the room, the full significance of what I'd seen finally came crashing down upon me. I couldn't even speak, I had no words for the conclusions that I'd come to. Hadrian beckoned me excitedly, "Come! Tell me what you've found!"

I shook my head sadly, reaching into my purse. I pulled the skull out and handed it to him, looking away as he pored over it excitedly. "Thank you. This is an exciting moment! We will be the first people to lay their eyes upon Nasrudin in more than a thousand years! The things we will know... wait! Hold on a moment... what's this?"

Gods, is there yet more to the horrors of this burial? "What's wrong, Hadrian...?" My voice finally crept forth, barely a hoarse whisper. I was on the verge of tears just thinking about the suffering that man went through.

Hadrian looked very upset suddenly, as though he suspected I was playing some kind of sick joke on him. I felt quite the same way, only I knew in my heart it was no joke that lied in the tomb of Nasrudin. "This skull... you say this is the very skull from the sarcophagus in the burial chamber? Are you sure...?"

I nodded sadly, "Yes, I'm positive." I was about to say more, but I was too stunned to speak very coherently.

My interminable pause gave Hadrian the opening he needed to expound further on his discovery. "This skull... it's not elven! It's a human skull! This is impossible..." He shook his head slowly, growing almost as silent as I had been. He, too, was beginning to realize I wasn't joking, and he had a lot of thinking to do.

As Hadrian sat there, lost in thought, my voice finally seemed to make its way back to me. If I continued bumbling about, stunned at the sad truth of what really happened, I would never uncover the mystery. That, even moreso than what had already happened, would be a true travesty. "Hadrian... there's more." He looked up at me with hopeful eyes, eyes that made me feel guilty for what I had to tell him. "Something was drawn on the inside of the sarcophagus... in blood." "What was it? You said it was drawn in HIS BLOOD?"

I nodded grimly, "Yes... blood. It was a broken ring, with something in the center... I think that was the important part. The message, however, wasn't in a language I'm familiar with." I showed him the copy of the words I'd written down in my journal.

He shook his head uncomfortably. "I... I don't know what that symbolizes, nor why it would be there. The word looks like ancient Panarum, an ancient language used by early church Elders. It hasn't been used for centuries, but Gunther Willhelm is an expert and would know what it means... if it was drawn there by... Oh god... they buried him ALIVE..."

Hadrian was finally starting to understand the full horror of what I'd found, but there was yet one piece remaining he wasn't aware of. *I'm sorry, Hadrian, but if anybody can help me it's you...* "There's... still more, Hadrian. The skeleton was missing a finger on its right hand."

"His... right hand?" Hadrian's face very suddenly went pale. "Oh, no... it couldn't be... It was never known if the finger was actually that of the great Saint, but it would seem that it might very well be..."

I tried to put a hand comfortingly on Hadrian's shoulder, "The body in that sarcophagus... it's Manno." "

He stared sullenly out of the window in his room, obviously in shock. "Good god... why? Why would they have buried him in the tomb of Nasrudin? I... just..." his words trailed off, and he slowly grew silent.

The guilt that washed over me was intense, but it was important that I follow the path I'd discovered to its end, whatever that end might be. "Hadrian... what are we going to do?"

"I have no idea... this discovery... I'm speechless."

He steadies himself against his desk.

"A thousand years and no one ever even bothered to check. What fools have we been?"

He straightens himself.

"Listen my friend. I recommend you go and speak with Gunther about this. Find out what the message says. I can be of no further use."

He gazes beyond me, lost in thought.

"I'll get to the bottom of this, Hadrian. I promise..." I didn't want to do it just because the Silver Lady told me to, either. I was curious, angry, and even guilty... anybody else would have felt the same way after seeing the look on Hadrian's face.

He actually laughed, then, a dark and bitter laugh. "Perhaps this was a stone better left unturned, my friend. It's not every day that one is faced with the negation of his belief..." He lowered his head, staring at the floor.

"I'm so very sorry, Hadrian." He didn't respond, he just sat there, deeply in thought. There wasn't really anything I could do for him other than continue on my path. I had to see Gunther.

I walked across the hall and into Gunther's office. He brightened up as he saw me, completely unaware as to the horrors I'd found since we last spoke. "Always an honour," he greeted me.

I pulled out my journal and flipped it open to the page with the picture of the broken ring and the phrase, showing it to him. "Does this mean anything to you? The ring, or the words?"

He stared at it for several moments before looking back up at me, the confidence sparkling in his eyes as usual, "I can tell you this... the two words in that message... the first means 'opposite' and the second means 'truth'. As to the broken ring... I have no idea.... Have you found anything else? ...what is it? What's wrong?"

Gunther was considerably harder to lie to than Hadrian. "I saw inside of Nasrudin's sarcophagus." Gunther's face lit up with excitement, a rare expression for him. "Nasrudin is not in it. The body may be false... it seems to belong to Manno, and before he died he wrote the message I just showed you on the lid of the sarcophagus with his own blood." His excitement faded and instead he seemed to think very hard on what I'd told him. At the very least he was taking it a lot better than Hadrian.

"Interesting. It seems that the proverbial wool has been pulled over our eyes... but for what reason? I suppose it could be that the early church elders believed that an ascension story might strengthen people's beliefs... but at the cost of another man's life? I find that very difficult to believe... BUT I have found something that I believe may confirm that those remains are false..."

I shrugged, clueless, "What, Gunther? What did you find?" The man never ceased to impress me. Even in the face of such an astonishing and ghastly truth, he continued onward without even a pause.

"Remember I told you I was working on those older translations?" I nodded emphatically. "I found another passage from that which is inconsistent with the Archaeon we read today. Have you heard the passage where it talks about the final resting place of Nasrudin...?"

"Yes... Alexander told me..." I did not like where this was going.

He was so very proud the way he explained it to me that I couldn't help but grin in the face of everything I'd just discovered. He was the exact opposite of Hadrian. "Well, today's Archaeon reads '...Nasrudin traveled to the southernmost tip of the land, and there laid himself to rest.' The copy I've been translating almost says the same exact thing,

except for one slight difference. It reads 'Nasrudin **CROSSED THE WATERS**, and traveled to the southernmost tip of the land.' Do you know what that means?"

Of course I do... it means he's not here... it means I still haven't found what the Silver Lady wants me to find. "What does it mean, Gunther?" "I'm saying that I don't think Nasrudin was buried here in Caladon... we have always just assumed that the scriptures were speaking of the **MAINLAND**, and, of course, when the remains were found, no one ever bothered to look again..."

I nodded along with him, having come to the very same conclusion myself. "So where are his remains?" If nothing else, at least I'd find where I really had to go. It seemed a shame, though, that the path I'd been going down was not the one that would ultimately lead to foiling Arronax's dark plans. It meant I'd been wasting my time. *Well... I suppose it's not like the old boy really seems in a hurry to come back. Stennar made it through over 4 years ago and we've still not seen more than that single shade of Arronax. I wonder what's taking him so long?*

Gunther broke my train of thought by answering my question, "The southernmost tip of **ANY** land in Arcanum is the Isle of Thanatos... to the south of here. I think that is where you next should go." *Why was I afraid you were going to say that? Bloody Thanatos... how in the nine hells am I supposed to get there? No captain in their right mind will take me to that hellhole.* "I might ask you a favor... if you have the time before you leave, perhaps you could uncover the truth behind Saint Manno? There are men here who would be interested in finding the responsible party..."

If I'm not in such a hurry after all, it certainly seems like a mystery worth pursuing. I nodded, "Yes, I think I will do just that... but who would do such a thing? Why would they go to all the trouble to stage something of such an incredible magnitude?"

"I don't know, my friend. Perhaps there is something about the actual remains of Nasrudin which they are afraid of. You should seek out his final resting place, and there, I think, you will find your answers..." Answers... and also several dozen beasts quite intent on clawing my eyes out and gnawing the meat off my bones. "I will, Gunther. Thank you and good day..."

"Thank you, my friend. I look forward to hearing about whatever you might be able to uncover..." Gunther was friendly as always, but it was hard for me to be happy at the news that my journey would take me to Thanatos. I started out towards the front of the church, trying to decide how to go about solving the mystery of Mannox before departing... rather, before finding out how in the hell I could even find a ship captain crazy enough to take me to Thanatos. *Hmm... Teach just might do it, actually... if anybody would, it's him...*

"Did I not tell you as much, Samantha?" Vollinger gently teased me.

"Tell me what?" I stared at him uncomfortably. I honestly didn't know what he was talking about and I felt like he was being just a touch too familiar for a spy. *I've got to stop this... he's not really a spy anymore... he's with me because he wants to be.*

"I told you that you're taking me on a rather thorough tour of the world. Your adventures would rival the renowned Franklin Payne himself!" I could tell that Vollinger was just having fun with me, though I did dimly remember him saying something about Thanatos earlier.

My train of thought, and our conversation, was interrupted when I saw Alexander. *If anybody would be interested in what I've just discovered about Mannox it will be that man...* I walked over to him boldly, steeling myself for the reaction he might have. I didn't know Alexander very well, but I knew he would be very, very angry when he learned the truth. "Hello, Alexander... I'm afraid I have grave news to share with you. I've been uncovering some strange things..." "Really? Just what are you talking about?"

Start small and work my way up... "Gunther's discovered that the name of the Panrii was actually mistranslated. In the ancient language, the Panarii were known as the Keepers of the Gate." *Very small.*

For obvious reasons, that didn't really bother him. "That is strange, my friend, but it seems a fairly trivial thing... there are small differences in almost every translation. This was probably just an honest mistake."

I nodded, "Yes, but there's more... I'm sure you're familiar with the name K'an Hua? He's the man who witnessed Mannox's ascension. It seems he is also the one who first discovered the remains of Nasrudin." *...the false remains of Nasrudin... in the face of what I've found, I truly cannot ignore that coincidence...*

Alexander seemed slightly more perturbed at that fact, and moreso at just how important I seemed to think it was. "Hmmm. That is an interesting fact. Perhaps there is something amiss here. Was there anything else?"

"Y-yes," I had difficulty putting my thoughts into words. Alexander was a very hard man, and his intent stare put me very off. I didn't want to anger him, even if I knew that anger would never be directed at me. "I saw the inside of Nasrudin's crypt... the skull in the sarcophagus was human, not elven."

Alexander's face goes hard as stone.

"This is grave news. Obviously the remains are a fake. We must find out what all of this means to me... was there any evidence?"

...and now for the doozy. "Yes, unfortunately, there is yet more. Whoever was buried in the sarcophagus was obviously buried alive, he wrote a cryptic message on the inside with his own blood. That and... the skeleton was missing a finger on its right hand." I flinched, anticipating what was to come.

Thankfully, it never came. I opened my eyes and I could see Alexander clenching his fists tightly, barely containing his rage but containing it nonetheless. "I see. If you find out what all of this means, return to me. If indeed my fam... I mean... the blood of Mannox was spilled for some darker plot, you can be assured that there will be retribution. I swear it by my life. Was there anything else?"

The hard part was over. "Just one more thing. Gunther did uncover another discrepancy in the Archaeon... a phrase that was left out of the Archaeon as we know it. It would seem that it states Nasrudin crossed the water before traveling to the southernmost tip of the land... his remains cannot be here."

"It seems like we've all been deceived, my friend. It seems your path no longer lies with us. But if you have the time, perhaps you could look into the message that was written on the inside of the crypt. Return if you find what it means. Others will listen to you. I hope you find the true resting place of Nasrudin..."

"Thank you, Alexander, I will... and I promise I'll get to the bottom of the message I found." I turned, walking away from Alexander and out towards the front of the church. I breathed in deeply, then exhaled. I'd learned a number of very significant truths in such a short period of time and it was all terribly overwhelming. I could see from the looks in my companions' faces that I wasn't the only one to feel that way. I sat down on the step in front of the church and began petting Terry on the head. He woofed lightly.

The sun was just setting on the horizon and the streets of Caladon grew dark. *Well... I suppose if I've got nothing else to do, now would be a fine time to break a fellow thief out of prison.* "Say, you all look fairly tired and I could use some fresh air. Why don't you grab us an inn room, and order me a couple shots of whiskey. I'll join you in a short while."

I could see the confusion on their faces, but slowly every one of them complied.

Chapter the Fifty Eighth: An End To Mystery

I walked off in the opposite direction of my companions, hoping I would get the chance to see them again. To say that I was nervous would have been a rather extreme understatement, but I also had confidence in my own abilities. I was no stranger to the Caladonian high security prison, only this time I didn't intend on needing to be bailed out. *Frederick*... I shook the thought of him off as quickly as it came; I had a job to do.

As Mrs. Morgan had suggested might be the case, the exterior guard to the prison had a rather serious lack of commitment to his job. It was barely even dusk and he'd already dozed off. I quickly picked the lock to the prison and stepped inside. The second line of defense was a trap door, also locked, and also easily picked. I'd been this way before, just with a much larger escort. If I could just keep my memories from overwhelming me they would be a great asset.

I wasn't the stealthiest person in the world, but I at least knew a thing or two about proper sneaking. I carried my shoes in one hand and my pick in the other, quietly opening door after door on my way into the prison. The guard was thankfully light, as I imagined they didn't have much of a problem with people breaking IN. Once I got through the first few layers, however, I had to start being more careful.

Guards patrolled through the hallways at regular intervals, and if I were anywhere near a torch when they passed I would be spotted for sure. I counted the timing between guards, gauging just how quickly I'd have to sneak to avoid a patrol. When I felt I had the greatest amount of time to get to the other side of the prison, I made for the southern wall and from there towards the west. Unfortunately, I hadn't quite anticipated a door in my way.

I fumbled at the lock quickly, praying that my skill would turn it quickly before the next patrol ran through. I was in luck and I managed to shove it aside in only a scant few seconds, quickly pushing my way past it and creeping to the next dark corner of the prison. I hid in that corner until the next guard passed me by and then I quietly followed him, my eyes searching for an occupied prison on the far wall. At last, I found it. I spied a halfling in a particularly tightly secured cell on the complete opposite of the jail from the entrance. They were right to put him where he stood the least chance of escaping, but in the end it wouldn't do them a damn bit of good.

"Looking for someone, friend?"

"Keep your voice down!" I hissed, "Are you JT Morgan?"

He nodded slowly, glancing over me with a curious look on his face. "I am he. Might I help you with something?" His voice suggested he was amused to have a visitor at such a late hour, but I also suspected he had a good idea of why I was there.

"Your mother sent me. I have your tools." I waved the red cloth pack in the dim torchlight so he could get a good look at it.

"Oh!!" he exclaimed in quiet surprise. It seemed he really hadn't known why I was there. Perhaps he'd thought I would bail out on my end of the agreement. "Yes. She forewarned me of your coming. I am impressed with your skill, to have made it so far..."

That doesn't excuse you from training me to be even better. "Did your mother inform you of our agreement?"

"Yes. In exchange for my locksmith kit, I will train you as a Master in the art. It is the least I can do."

That was exactly what I'd wanted to hear. "Very good. Here are your tools." I passed the red cloth pack through the bars and he set it down on the ground, unrolling the cloth to make sure I hadn't pilfered anything important. I supposed I couldn't really blame him.

When he was satisfied as to the condition of his tools he looked back up at me with a smile, "Thank you... they are all here. Very good! Now about your training..." He hesitated, frowning slightly.

You'd better not be backing out of it now that you got what you wanted.

Damn you! "Yes?"

He sighed. "In managing to get these tools to me, you have shown that you have already mastered locksmithy. Your skill is impressive. Might I daresay it rivals mine own? Allow me to bestow the formal title of Master locksmith upon you. You have earned it."

Flattery will get you everywhere. I supposed if I was confident enough to break a man out of prison that I was, indeed, skilled. It was foolish to seek him out for training in the first place, but that was my own fault and not his. If he truly had nothing to teach me, there was little to be done. "Thank you... I think. Shall we leave this wretched place?" "You must retrace your steps and leave alone. I will wait a time, to allow you safe passage. Once I am sure you are gone, I will make my escape. There is no sense in two of us getting caught. If the alarm should sound, be cautious. Now go!"

It did make a good amount of sense. I also supposed that implied if I were to be caught, I could count on JT Morgan to come to my rescue. That seemed like a fair enough trade to me. "I go. It was a pleasure to meet you, sir, and I hope I never see you again." I winked. "Goodbye."

I retraced my steps as he'd suggested, timing my movements so that I lurked in the shadows of the prison whenever a guard strolled past. As luck would have it I somehow managed to avoid alerting a guard on my entire way out. When I emerged back on the street the guard that was supposed to be watching the entrance was still fast asleep, snoring as loudly as ever. I'd have turned him in for sure if JT weren't also making his way out of the prison.

Walking half of the length down King's Way brought me to the only building in town that was both an inn and a bar, where I suspected my companions would be waiting for me. As luck would have it, they were, and I sat down in the unclaimed chair with two shots of whiskey in front of it. Virgil gave me a curious look, as though he'd suspected what I was really up to but didn't feel the need to say anything. It was something I'd had to do alone, more people following me certainly wouldn't have helped.

"Feeling better?" Sebastian grinned, sliding a third shot over in my direction. I slid it back to him and held up my first shot invitingly. He

picked up the shot I slid back at him and clinked glasses with me, then we both downed our shots.

"I am now." I grinned back at him. "I think I've come up with a plan on where to go next."

"So we're off to Cattán then?" Vollinger remarked.

I knew he was making yet another joke about all of the places we were traveling, but I decided to tease him anyway, "No, you're a bit off... Thanatos is farther south than that... close, though!" He snorted sarcastically and I continued what I had been about to say previously. "I think we ought to take another look around Roseborough. The diagram on the lid of the sarcophagus... it might refer to the Ring of Brodgar."

Virgil's face lit up at the idea, "Hey, there's a good thought! It's certainly worth checking out."

I tossed the second shot down, a pleasant tingle finally starting to reach my limbs. The four of us chatted for a while longer while Terry happily gnawed on the jerky I kept giving him. I was generous when I was tipsy. Eventually we did wander off to our rooms, and I slept quite soundly for the first time in a long, long while, though doubtlessly I had the whiskey to thank. Despite how well I slept, I still woke up with an aching in my heart, yearning to see Frederick one last time... to apologize, to say goodbye. I tried not to dwell on such thoughts, but some mornings it was more difficult than others. I made my preparations to leave despite the foul mood slowly coming over me and went about rousing the others from their respective rooms.

We journeyed to Roseborough immediately, chatting about why MannoX wrote what he did. My pet theory was that he was trying to point out the center stone that had been removed from the ring, and that's why it was so heavily emphasized. Sebastian insisted that it was just because he'd been writing in blood and it got a little messy. Regardless, our debate wouldn't be settled until I saw that stone. When we arrived in Roseborough it was the first thing I looked at.

"See? I told you he meant the center stone." I teased Sebastian.

"Now wait a minute," he insisted, "That doesn't mean a thing. So what if the stone's got numbers on it? That doesn't tell you anything."

"Sure it does!" He still seemed confused. "There are numbers and directions... the numbers are probably a distance of some kind. He also wrote opposite, so let's go in the opposite direction for the specified number of paces."

Virgil nudged Sebastian in the ribs lightly, "It seems like a good idea to me."

"Aw, fine. I don't have any better ideas anyway," he muttered.

First, we traveled to the center of the Ring of Brodgar. There was a small dirt path off to the side of the inn that lead straight to it. It was every bit as magnificent as it seemed from the distance, if not more. The runes carved on the stones were utterly mystifying, but that only made them all the more intriguing.

From the exact center of the ring I pointed myself in a northeasterly direction and counted out exactly 30 paces. I found that the very last step took me exactly to a strange, round stone platform buried in the ground deeply. I would hardly have been able to see it at all if not for having walked directly to it. "Do you still doubt me, Sebastian?"

He shook his head 'no' with shame. I grinned and continued following the directions on the center stone, although traveling in the opposite directions as the ones specified. Each time I completed a direction I found myself standing on yet another stone that I would use as my new starting point for the next direction. It took me several hours to finally wind my way around the odd maze of stones, occasionally having to backtrack when I lost count for one reason or another, but at last I finally came upon a thick, stone gateway buried into the dirt between two bushes. It was very well hidden, and I wondered just how long it had been around without being discovered.

Hmm... another door with a code word... well, I'm sure as hell not

knocking, but what to say...? Vollinger walked straight up to the stone and spoke, "Truth." Just like the stone door to Nasrudin's crypt before it, the small, round stone that made up the center of the gateway slid aside with a rumble and vanished into the frame around it.

"Thanks, Vollinger... good thinking!" I peered beyond him into the small chamber hidden behind the stone gate. All I could see from the outside was darkness.

"You're welcome, Samantha. I do try to take a rather analytical view of things." I pulled out an old electrical light I'd made quite a long time ago for practice and I flipped it on, peering again inside of the chamber. I could see a rather old, but very intricately crafted sword lying on the ground next to a book. I knew that both were old just by looking at them, but the chamber had been so well hidden and sealed that they were in marvelous condition considering how old they really had to be. I picked up the book and opened the front cover. It appeared to be a journal of sorts. Curious as I was, I wasted no time in starting to read through it.

5th of Harvest, 1108
Krynn Arden himself
appointed me First Acolyte
today. I feel fortunate to
have finally met him, as his
days seem near over. I was
overwhelmed with prideful
emotion at the thought that I
was now to carry on the most
important task of maintaining
the wards.

1st of Darkfall, 1108
I presided over my first
Panarii council today. All

went well, and we established
without a doubt the divinity
of Nasrudin. The usual
debate ensued, but this time
we were able to convince those
on the council who still held
doubts that Nasrudin was
indeed sent by the gods to
lead us in this world.

15th of Darkfall, 1108
My mind is troubled. An elf
by the name of K'an Hua
descended from the mountains
today and has begun

ingratiating himself into the council. He claims to be the son of an original Elven Council member, but I am not certain I believe him. The others have taken a liking to him, though, and seem to have no doubts as to the veracity of his tale. I do not know why he makes me uncomfortable, but I feel great distress when I am in his presence.

10th of New Sun, 1109

K'an Hua has brought several of his elven folk into the fold. Worse, he is beginning to spread heresy about the truths of the church! He has insinuated that the wards are merely an outward representation of an inward discipline that we all must cultivate, or some such nonsense. He trivializes the life of the great Nasrudin by offhandedly suggesting that he never existed, that the whole tale of Nasrudin and the banishment is allegorical! He has not been stating these preposterous theories outright, but I have engaged him in several philosophical debates on matters of doctrine, and have all but cornered him into admitting his beliefs. His animosity towards me is growing, but he is not my concern. It is the rest of the leadership. They welcome him...he offers an easier, less disciplined view of the Panarii life.

35th of New Sun, 1109

Amidst my great turmoil I have been delivered a sign! I was visited today by the physical manifestation of Nasrudin! I am certain of this. As I was tending the wards (as I do these days with no help from my brothers) he appeared to me. He asked me all manner of questions, and appeared pleased when I explained how I was maintaining the wards. We talked for what seemed hours, and he even tested my faith by hinting that he knew Nasrudin, and that he was not divine! It was only after he departed that I realized I had actually been speaking with Nasrudin himself. I do not know from where this certainty comes, but I am sure in my heart that it was him.

37th of New Sun, 1109

K'an Hua means to kill me. Yesterday, I confronted him with the news of my vision of Nasrudin, and he exploded with rage, calling me a heretic. Him calling me a heretic! I would laugh if the situation were not so desperate. I almost attacked him on the spot, but I called upon my training to calm my rage and quickly excused myself from his office. I then returned to my room to contemplate what my course of action should be. Later that night, as I was out performing my walking meditation, I was set upon by his elven cohorts. After killing several of them, I fled. I do not know what I shall do now. I know my life will end should I set foot in the temple again, but it is not my life that matters. The truth of the Panarii must live beyond me. I can only imagine the lies K'an Hua has been spreading in my absence.

1st of Solstice, 1109

My exile is at an end. I have meditated on my situation, and I know what I must do. I will return to the temple and declare what I know for all to hear. I will leave my writings safely hidden here, along with my ceremonial sword, as I feel my death is at hand. My soul I now commit to the hands of Nasrudin.

*Mannox,
First Acolyte.*

"By the Gods..." I stared at Virgil wide-eyed. "We've got to get this to Alexander!" I hastily grabbed the sword before he could respond and I stalked off back towards the south. Virgil muttered about it for a short while until I finally handed the journal off to him. I did not stop my journey or even slow it, but nevertheless he did his best to read it while we walked and after a long enough while he finally handed it back to me. "Well?" I asked impatiently.

"Nothing. You're right, this belongs to Alexander. I think he should know." The curious looks on the others' faces subsided with Virgil's agreement, and we continued our journey back to Caladon in silence. It was late when we arrived, but that certainly wasn't going to stop me from delivering my news to Alexander. I pushed my way through the front door of the church and stalked up to Alexander purposefully. He bowed his head respectfully at me. *You deserve to know...* "I have something very important to tell you, Alexander."

His eyes lit up, "What? What did you find?"

"I found Mannox's journal..." The way he stared at me, so intent, so enraptured by my every word, I just couldn't do it. I couldn't tell him what had happened to the ancestor he held in such high esteem. "H-here... read it for yourself." I handed it to him, looking away. I sat there patiently for several minutes while he read every word eagerly, an expression of anger and horror slowly washing over his face. Alexander is silent for a long time. Then...

"It seems we, the Panarii, have an important responsibility. Many of your troubles, Living One, were born because we allowed ourselves to be deceived for so many years. That will be no longer. And it seems that my family has been deceived and dishonored. I think I know to whom I must speak about this."

He looks in the direction of the high priest's chambers.

Then boy do I ever have a gift for you... "I also found this..." I held out the finely crafted sword that I had discovered next to the journal.

He stared at it for several moments, utterly stunned, not quite believing what he was looking at. "I... never hoped to see this... it was lost so many years ago. It will be put to good use... I can assure you."

I smiled, thinking about exactly what 'good use' meant. "I'm sure. Good bye, and good luck."

Before I could go, he grasped my hand in both of his. "Thank you, Living One. Your help here has been invaluable. I wish you luck on your quest, and in the conflict to come."

"Good luck to you, too, Alexander. I'm trusting you to set things right here." He finally smiled back at me, understanding my meaning. Without another word, I departed. *One down... two to go.* I'd made other promises, and I intended to keep them. Next I visited old Hadrian, hoping that my news would cheer him up at least a little bit.

He looked up at me with dark, haunted eyes the moment I set foot in his room. I placed a hand on his shoulder and spoke to him softly, almost like a child although I didn't quite mean it as such. "Hadrian... I've found the whole truth."

His response was barely a whisper, and it looked as though he was almost afraid of what I had to say. I hoped he didn't have to be. "What?" he rasped.

I sat down on another chair next to his and related the entire tale, telling him of the original purpose of the Panarii and the betrayal of MannoX by K'an Hua. He listened intently, growing more and more animated as my tale continued. At last, when I finished, his expression was one of quiet rage.

Anger flares in the eyes of Hadrian.

"The man truly was a Saint... a Saint and a warrior. And it seems that we Panarii have been neglecting our true duties. Well, that will no

longer be the case."

He places a hand to my shoulder.

"Thank you, my friend. You've done this church, and the world, a great service..."

I made a promise to you, and I kept it. "Glad to be of service, Hadrian."

The satisfied look on his face, the relief to the anguish I'd brought to him made all of the effort worthwhile.

He smiled up at me, making a strange but quick gesture in the general direction of the back of the room. "As a token of my appreciation, feel free to take the objects in the display case. I can't tell you what they'd be good for, but they're yours all the same. The cases will be open now."

I stared at him in shock, glancing back and forth between him and the cases at the back of the room as if to ask if it was really all right. He nodded at me gently and I couldn't help the grin that was now spreading across my face. "Thank you so very much, Hadrian."

"Would you do me just one more favor?" He asked as I started towards the back of the room. I nodded at him. "Speak with Alexander of these things if you haven't already done so. I'm an old man, and tired... there is little I can do to right this wrong. But Alexander is strong, the strongest of us all, and will know what to do."

"I already have, Hadrian. I returned his ancestral sword to him and he told me it would be put to 'good use'." I winked as I said the last part, ensuring that Hadrian understood my meaning.

He thought it over for a moment, a slow nod coming over him as he realized exactly what that meant. "I envy not the man who Alexander finds responsible..."

Hadrian stared out the window peacefully while I walked over to the containers at the back of the room. First I gently opened the container on the far right and plucked out the skeletal finger of Manno. I felt a strange power wash over me as I held it and I noticed the thin, leather cord that it was tied to. It felt somewhat

gruesome, but I hung the cord around my neck and buried the skeletal finger beneath my dress, wearing it like a secret amulet.

I next picked out the eye of Kraka-tur from beneath its container, studying it with a sick fascination. It truly did look and feel like a rock, but a very smooth one. I placed it into my purse, figuring I would discover a use for it at a later date. Lastly I picked up the very device I'd desired from the moment I laid eyes on it, a device I could only think of as the glass key. I very carefully wrapped it up in some spare cloth and gently set it into my purse, being extra careful to not break it. I waved goodbye to Hadrian and wandered across the hall to tell Gunther the news. He was the last person I felt obligated to inform before running off to the north, chasing excitedly after the mystery of the iron clan.

Gunther greeted me as warmly as ever, "Hello, my sister. How are you today?"

"I started off fairly unsure, but now I'm doing quite fine, thank you for asking. I've discovered the truth about Mannox. Actually, I found his personal journal... where he wrote about his duty as First Acolyte in maintaining the wards around the Ring of Brodgar. Unfortunately, an elf whose name you might recognize, K'an Hua, subverted the Panarii into abandoning that duty... and when Mannox refused, he was killed."

Gunther says nothing for a long while. Then...

"It seems that we have been misled from the beginning. And now I see why we were first called the "defenders of the gate." It seems we have a great responsibility... we shall begin to live up to it."

That's what I liked about Gunther. He was willing to accept things at face value and deal with them in his own way without getting overly bothered about them. It was a trait I sorely lacked, and wished terribly that I didn't. "What do you think I should do now, Gunther?"

He looked towards the front of the church, thinking about something, and then back at me. "Well, if you would, please go and tell Alexander what you've found. I would think that he's going to want to have a very long talk with some of his superiors. I'm glad I'm not one of them." He smiled, then, quite wickedly. It was rather unbecoming of him, but I couldn't help smiling back.

"I've already done so, Gunther... and I couldn't agree more with your assessment. I must be going, then... good day to you."

"Good day, friend." He called out to me as I left. I barely heard it at all, as I was in quite the hurry on my way out. I'd done what I promised I would do, and now I could turn my attention to a wholly more positive mystery. Not that discovering the truth behind MannoX was wrong in any way, but there was something inherently saddening about the whole thing. It was hard to not feel sorrow for what happened to the poor man, and sympathy for his proud descendant, Alexander.

"Thank you, Samantha." Virgil's voice sounded very soft and genuine.

"You're quite welcome, Virgil. I didn't do it just for you, but I'm glad that it makes you happy. You see? I don't hate the Panarii religion after all!" I laughed and he started to turn a light shade of red.

"I... I know you don't... I suppose I'm sorry for being so pushy all the time. You're right, it really doesn't matter if you're the Living One or not. You're still doing the right thing." I could tell that Virgil meant what he said, but there was more to it than that... it was as though he really wanted me to be the living one, even if he knew it didn't matter. I couldn't think of anything positive to say on the subject, so in a rare moment of sensibility I kept my fool mouth shut.

After many days of journeying we finally arrived at the entrance to the iron clan caverns. I pulled the glass key out of my purse very carefully and unwrapped it with great care. I was nervous at first, but eventually rather relieved that it seemed to have made it in one piece. I placed it inside of the metal pillar until it fit snugly, and then with a barely audible click the metal gate on the ground next to it opened up.

Wordlessly, I stepped down into it and followed the lengthy, metal staircase. At the bottom the cave widened out into a spectacularly large, stone chamber with a rather ornate symbol emblazoned on the ground. I thought the symbol looked somewhat familiar, but I couldn't place exactly where from. I wrote it off as something I

might've seen in one of Frederick's books at some point. *Books I'll never have the pleasure of reading by his side again...* I let out a deep sigh, and Virgil placed an understanding hand on my shoulder. We continued inward.

The cave itself almost seemed to function like a second layer of entry. At the far end of the chamber was a thick, reinforced iron gate that looked as though it could be barred shut to keep out intruders who made it past the first gate I'd already been through. It was presently unlocked, however, so I wandered through it curiously.

On the other side were extensive hallways, looking completely abandoned by all forms of life. There were no zombies, nor wolves in this particular abandoned cave. It had stayed perfectly sealed since whatever fate befell the dwarves that once lived in its grand halls. At last I discovered a room with three exceptionally large, iron pillars and a throne made of iron at the far side. No sooner had I entered it, however, than I was assaulted by humanoid machines! They were much like the clunky abomination that had assaulted me in Ashbury, but their construction was far sturdier. I reflexively swung at one with my axe and scored a powerful blow, however it barely even seemed damaged.

I ducked underneath its powerful, mechanical arm just in time to avoid what could very well have been a lethal blow considering the power of the damned thing. It wasn't alone, however, and in my negligence I took another blow to my side. I winced in pain, wondering if the bastard had just cracked a rib. Terry snarled and grabbed the machine by its spindly ankle, biting down hard. I heard a soft crack and Terry suddenly let go, blood dripping out of his mouth. He whined pathetically and shuffled off to the side of the room. *I'll salve you up a nice jerky, Terry... don't worry, we'll handle these things for you...*

I twirled around the machine that Terry had wounded himself on, slicing at it expertly with my axe blade. I'd managed to dispatch the clunky machine in Ashbury only due to its shabby construction, but now I had far more tricks up my sleeve and I was far more skilled. Even a machine of such amazingly perfect construction eventually fell beneath my repeated assault. It felt shameful to ruin such

spectacular robots, but their construction was so perfect that I hardly had any other choice. It was that or let them ruin me, and I wasn't planning on dying for some damned ancient dwarven secret.

Sebastian's gun managed to blow a gaping hole in a second one of the machines, the peculiar chemical properties of it reacting with the metal the machine was made out of quite in our favor. Vollinger and Virgil laid into the third, Virgil distracting it while Vollinger tried his best to aim carefully at it. Vollinger's bullets, unfortunately, bounced right off of the machine's hard exterior. I ran up behind it and struck it repeatedly with my axe, relentless in my abuse. Before it could even turn around to try and block my attacks, it was finished.

I wiped the sweat off of my brow and slid my axe back onto my belt carefully. "Well, looks like this Iron Clan really had a flair for technology, eh?"

Vollinger cursed quietly, "I've never fought against anything that could deflect bullets... what marvelous technological construction indeed..."

Sebastian grinned, "Hey, with this gun you gave me it was no problem at all! Where the hell did you get this thing anyway?"

"I...er... I made it..." The look on Sebastian's face was utterly disbelieving. "It's not my design... I really just formed the barrel out of mithril and combined it with a part I scavenged on the Isle of Despair... to be honest, I don't know quite what's in it. At least it works, right?" His expression still didn't change much.

Virgil sat down with his back against one of the iron pillars. "Boy, I sure hope there aren't any more-" He cut off suddenly as the pillar he was leaning up against started whirring and creaking, a compartment on the front of it opening up. Inside I could see a thick, dark grey stone with unrecognizable characters on it.

Virgil scrambled to his feet while I walked over to the strange container, pulling the heavy stone out of it. "This must be the Durin Stone that Erick was after. Amazing..."

While I marveled over that stone, Virgil wandered over to a second compartment and Vollinger to the third. They opened easily enough, seemingly by pressing a button near the base of them, and inside were ancient dwarven treasures of the highest magnitude. Virgil came back to me dragging a particularly weighty hammer along. "I don't think that's going to fit into my purse." I said sarcastically.

He sighed, "I suppose I can carry it, but it's too heavy for me to use. I'd like it if we just left it with Erick when we give him the stone."

I nodded, "That's fine." Vollinger was staring into his compartment and I wandered over to see what he was looking at.

"Oh my... now that is a rather fine quality suit of armor. I don't think that'll fit in my purse either." I stared at it in awe.

Vollinger reached in and pulled it out of the compartment, staggering slightly under its weight. "Well... it's a touch heavy, but if I put it on over my clothing it shouldn't be too bad."

I laughed at him, "Do you have any idea how difficult it'll be to fire your gun from inside of that thing?"

He simply shrugged. "Who needs to fire a gun when nobody can lay a finger on you in the first place?" The next leg of our journey was bound to be an interesting one.

Chapter the Fifty Ninth: Let's Have Us An Adventure, Shall We?

"Say, Vollinger... since you seem to be so fond of traveling around the rest of the world, you wouldn't object to visiting the lands North of the Grey Mountains, would you?" I stared at him with a knowing smile.

I could hear Virgil sigh, knowing already that it was going to take place. Sebastian simply leaned up against a nearby rock and stared out at the horizon, petting Terry lightly. Vollinger had a rather amused look on his face, "Do I have any reason to object? What are your reasons for visiting all the way up there?"

"Well," I tried to explain. I didn't relish the idea of going to Thanatos any more than the legion of sea captains that avoided it like the plague. "There is that ruby the halfling in Stillwater mentioned a long while ago. The next altar on my list is also over there somewhere..." I'd only thought of the altar because I heard a rumor about it from the bartender in Ashbury the first time I went to go looking for Captain Teach. *I wonder where Teach is anchored currently...? If at all.*

Vollinger shrugged, "I don't have any problems with that, though I suspect that is precisely why you asked me and not Virgil." I grinned and squeezed Virgil's hand. He only sighed again. "It is quite a bit out of our way, but we shouldn't be rushing off to Thanatos at any rate. If nothing else, a lengthy and unprepared journey through the wilds ought to give us some idea of what Thanatos will be like when we get there."

"It's settled then!" I started walking off towards the north, since it seemed like the nearby land bridge would be the fastest route to go.

"We've got an altar to visit!"

Sebastian laughed hoarsely and Terry let out a hearty woof. Vollinger followed along willingly, albeit slowly in his new suit of armor, and Virgil finally gave in, "All right... I suppose dragging this hammer around a while longer will only make me stronger."

"That's the spirit! I can always count on you, Virgil." He only sighed yet again.

As tended to happen during long trips through the Glimmering Forest, I lost all track of time on the way to the altar. It was truly a long, long ways away, much farther than any other single leg of my journey. Vollinger was right about one thing, it seemed like a trial run of what we might expect to encounter on Thanatos. Eventually we did manage to find it, although not before long exhausting our supplies.

I placed a Mnura coin onto it as an offering and prayed for just a few moments, feeling the blessing wash over me warmly. I breathed in deeply as I stood up, feeling satisfied and triumphant for having successfully accomplished what I'd set out to. There weren't a whole lot of gods left to visit and I had yet to be cursed... I knew I had to be on the right track.

"Now all that's left is to make our way back, with a quick stop by the Ruby Glade that Gildor marked on my map. That ought to be good news, eh?" I looked over in Virgil's direction and he nodded with a weak smile on his face. He'd run out of his fatigue potions long before the rest of us had run out of our supplies, but dragging that hammer around everywhere certainly wasn't helping.

I saw the stones that Gildor had mentioned as soon as we approached the glade, and a feeling of intense dread came over me. *The Great Ruby of K'alru is Found. Heed this warning ere you move around. He who walks without a sound shall pass the death beneath the ground.* It was exactly as Gildor had said. I looked further into the glade, spying the intensely beautiful and massive ruby in the center.

Although the somewhat recent corpse and the somewhat less recent

piles of bones were off-putting, I still desperately wanted that ruby. I knew what would happen, yet still it was as though it had some sort of power over me. I stepped forward, slowly at first... one step at a time. My pace quickened... I wanted that ruby so incredibly badly.

"Samantha, no! Stop!" Virgil shouted at me, running in my direction and trying to keep up. I ran as fast as I could, if only I could make it to that ruby before the creatures appeared, perhaps I could outrun them... they seemed so bound to the stones and the glade itself that I knew I could make my getaway.

"Stay back, Virgil, I'll just grab the ruby and we can go!" I ran right past the warning stones and suddenly heard an awful sound. It sounded like ground cracking, like a piece of clothing ripping apart at the seams. I felt a sudden warmth all around me and saw a bright shimmering light coming at me in every direction. I flinched as though that light might strike me and as soon as I opened my eyes I was completely surrounded.

Son of a bitch! I will NOT die here, not for this damned ruby. My axe was off of my belt before the first demon could even growl. I swung at it with an upward arc, cutting through half of its torso, blood issuing forth from its midsection. It squealed horrendously like some kind of hell-spawned pig and I moved on to the next target.

My strength waning rapidly, it took me two full strikes to bring the next demon down. I put such force behind my blows that I was tiring out quickly, and still I was entirely surrounded by demons. There were so many of them that as soon as one fell another one would take its place. Virgil started to finally catch up with me, as did the others, but the demons finally got their bearings and attacked me.

The first attack I met with greater force, chopping off the very arm that the beast had tried to use to attack me. I deftly dodged out of the way of several more attacks, my recent experiences having taught me quite a bit about fighting while surrounded. The demons lashed out at me again and again, but very rarely did they actually catch me and even then it was just barely.

I ignored the shallow claw wounds they inflicted on me, felling demon after demon with my axe. I refused to depend on the help I knew was coming, striking out time after time and destroying more demons than I ever thought possible. At last I heard a gunshot and saw a pocket of gore explode outward from the last demon. I could tell that Vollinger had missed, but for him that still meant hitting his mark.

I saw Virgil behind the beast, swinging away at it furiously. I joined him, taking advantage of the distraction he provided, and I laid the demon low with one final strike.

At last, the ruby was mine. Somehow the strange feeling that had come over me was gone and I felt very empty placing the ruby into my purse. I felt significantly better knowing that it would tempt nobody ever again, and that the demons that had killed so many were finally gone. I'd failed when it came to sneaking past, or resisting the foul curse, but I'd succeeded marvelously at cleansing the glade of the foul presence that infested it.

I looked Virgil in the eyes, noting his exasperated, worried glance. "I'm... sorry."

He sighed, and smiled gently, placing a hand upon my shoulder. "No, don't worry about it... I suppose it all ended well. You're not one to die that easily... those demons never stood a chance!"

Sebastian laughed bitterly, "You're not kidding, the real demon here is the one what just put the ruby in her damned purse. I never want to get on your bad side, Samantha."

I chuckled, happy that nobody was overly upset at the whole thing. "Thanks for the vote of confidence, I suppose. You don't have anything to worry about, Sebastian, for as good as I seem to have gotten at killing I really rather dislike it."

We chatted idly on the way back around the Grey Mountains, not daring to try crossing them on foot and with no gear. Instead we wound around to Hardin's pass and passed through there to Stillwater. I knocked on Gildor's door and he opened it, quite

surprised to see me. I wordlessly pulled the ruby out of my purse and held it out to him.

"Oh, well done! I have had great hope that you were capable. Please, let me..."

His eyes practically glazed over as he stared at it, clearly lost in his obsession. "Here you go. I actually found it quite simple to retrieve..."
...insofar as I can't sneak worth a damn.

He held it in his hands, his mouth wide open. "Oh! It is everything I recall it to be! You are truly a brave soul." He stared at it intensely for several moments, forgetting I was even there. I cleared my throat and he suddenly remembered my existence. "Oh, yes. Forgive my distraction. You are truly a great adventurer! Here... here is the 1500 coin I promised. Thank you. Thank you, Samantha Colburn. May the gods bless you on your journey."

I took the large sack of coins from him, pawing through it idly to make sure it wasn't some kind of trick. "Thank you, Gildor. I bid you farewell." Gildor set the ruby down on a nearby table and started rummaging around in his chest, presumably looking for a place to put it or perhaps a decorative container of some kind.

I stared at it, knowing that I should have left already. I no longer felt the intense desire for the ruby that I did when I first ran after it, but there was still something not right about the way I felt. I almost felt guilty for leaving it with Gildor, as though it would somehow do him more harm than good. It certainly didn't seem proper for him to be obsessing over it quite so extremely.

I quick snatched the ruby from the table, stuffing it in my purse and making a dash for the exit. I ran as fast as my legs would take me, only stopping after I was a good distance out from Stillwater and I was sure that Gildor couldn't have followed. Sebastian was the first to catch up to me as he was the only one not lugging around heavy plate. He actually started laughing when I finally stopped, "Damn, woman, I never expected you to do THAT! By the gods I haven't had a fright like that since I 'accidentally' stepped on a gnome's foot in front of his half ogre bodyguard!"

Virgil finally caught up and he was exasperated, "What's gotten into

you? Have you gone completely crazy?"

I took one look at Sebastian's face again and started laughing myself. "Perhaps, Virgil, perhaps. Let's head down to Tarant. It's on the way to the next altar and I can get rid of this damned ruby at one of the random shops there before it causes us any further trouble. I don't like this thing... there's something not right about it."

Much to my surprise, he didn't seem to object to that plan in the slightest. "Fair enough, Samantha. That sounds like a good plan, actually." So that's exactly what we did.

I pawned the ruby off on a local junk dealer once we arrived and then scouted out the docks for any signs of Teach. It didn't look like he was hanging around Tarant these days, that was for sure. Just out of curiosity I decided to ask one of the local captains if he'd be willing to take me to Thanatos for a generous sum. As I'd suspected, I was laughed straight off of his ship. I definitely had to find Teach if I intended to continue on my journey.

Journeying even further to the South eventually took us to the abandoned ruins of Kree, where the barbarians that had sacked it built an altar to the evil god Shakar. I offered him a Reaper's Axe that I'd bought from the gypsy in Ashbury for just that purpose.

I shuddered as I felt his blessing wash over me. Although it was a proper boon, I still felt somewhat dirty for having received it. I gazed out upon the ruins of Kree with pity, regretting that a god like Shakar even existed in the world. *...and here I am, having received his blessing. This had better be worth the effort in the end.*

The ancient temple where the altar to Moorindal was hidden was practically on our way back towards the North. It made the most sense to me to make a quick stop there before proceeding to the Wheel Clan caverns so that I could make a second offer to Alberich while I was there. None of my companions objected and so that's exactly what I did. I offered a black diamond at the altar of Moorindal, a rather expensive and difficult to acquire gem that I'd obtained purely by luck in my travels.

The blessing that washed over me then was certainly a dark one, but I was pleased that it also seemed to cleanse all of the other blessings I'd received recently, from Torg to Shakar. It was somehow purer, less tainted, although it was also decidedly wicked. I shuddered for just a moment, looking very much forward to finishing off my pilgrimage to honor the old gods. I still had no idea where the altar to Velorien was located or what I needed to offer to it, but it wasn't quite time for that yet anyway. My next step was to visit Alberich for a second time, and I had the lava rock ready to offer to him.

The dwarves of the Wheel Clan welcomed me like their own kin, and I smiled at the thought. There were few places I had ever felt like I belonged previously, and the caverns of the Wheel Clan now felt second only to being out in the open wilderness with my companions. *Is this what your heart always desired, Bates?*

I wound my way through the winding corridors until I came back to Erick Obsidian's room. He greeted me heartily as I entered, but I only smiled. "Erick... I found the Iron Clan, and I've brought a gift for you." I pulled the Durin Stone out of my purse and handed it over to him, "Here... it's yours."

"You have! My god! I never dreamed... I mean, they were real... the stone... it's beautiful."

He is silent for a long time, turning the stone over in his hands.

"And what of the Iron Clan? What did you see?"

It was a difficult thing to describe, but I tried my best. While I talked Virgil stalked forward and placed the massive hammer on the table.

"It... it was incredible, Erick. They had technology built better than anything I've ever seen. Their home was in the most grand cavern, and I'm sure they hollowed it out themselves... even after so many years it was all in such pristine condition. They had fully functional automatons defending the place! In addition to the stone I found a suit of plate armor and a hammer, you may have both as I've no use for them."

He shook his head, smiling widely, "Its more than I ever hoped or dreamed. It seems they truly were advanced, far beyond what anyone could have known. I so look forward to visiting the caverns of the Iron Clan, and learning of their ways. Thank you, my friend. You've no idea the gift you've bestowed on us all."

"You're very welcome, Erick. I'm happy to have done what I could for the sake of history." I lightly curtsied to him, though he was so intent on the Durin Stone that he didn't even notice. I departed from his room, winding around yet more hallways until finally returning to the altar of Alberich. I offered another lava rock to him, praying briefly, and I felt his blessing wash over me once again, feeling so much more familiar now. I could still feel the unpleasantly dark blessing I'd received from Moorindal, but with Alberich's blessing I could more easily ignore it.

"So, where to next?" Virgil asked innocently.

It was a perfectly valid question. With the mystery of the Iron Clan resolved and the Durin Stone in the hands of the one that can best analyze it, I supposed that it was finally time. "I think perhaps we ought to see if we can't find Captain Teach somewhere? He wasn't in Tarant, and I think he was only in Ashbury before at Bates' request. Don't you think a town like Black Root would suit him just fine?"

Vollinger nodded, "Seems like as good of a guess as any. So we're off to Black Root then?"

"Black Root, eh?" Sebastian perked up. "I'm rather fond of that town. I'm all for any idea that involves visiting it."

Virgil started chuckling, "I should've suspected a man like you would be fond of Black Root. Sure, why don't we head there then."

Sebastian nudged Virgil roughly, "Hey, now, what's that supposed to mean? A man like me?"

I just laughed and began our journey back towards the South. It seemed like we'd been traveling all over the land and had very little to show for it, save for a few nasty scars. Even if the ultimate destination was Thanatos it would be nice to just relax on a ship for a week or two.

When we arrived in Black Root the whole town was bustling with activity. There was a man I didn't quite recognize parading down the

street with half a dozen people following him and shouting praises at him. "Welcome home, Payne!" "We love you, Payne!" *Hmm... so that's Franklin Payne, is it?* As quite possibly the only individual remaining in all of Arcanum who'd had adventures as far-reaching as my own, I was rather curious to talk to the fellow.

I followed him as he strolled down the street casually, trying not to associate myself with the legion of fans that chased after him excitedly. He at last stopped at a rather expansive house on the corner, bowing once to the assembled crowd and shouting his thanks to them before stepping inside. Judging by the comments they were shouting, he was actually stepping into his own home for a rare visit.

I waited several moments for the crowd to disperse, not caring one bit to draw overly much attention to myself, and finally I knocked on the door. Franklin himself answered it, which actually surprised me. I'd have figured he would've had a butler. "Hello! Can I help you, madam?" His voice was quite clear and he pronounced his words with incredible precision. For all the adventuring he did, I was pleased to note that he knew how to act polite and proper when it came down to it.

"Hello, sir. My name is Samantha Colburn, and you are?" I obviously knew who he was - it would've been difficult not to - but still, manners like his demanded the same in return so I tried to be polite. "Me?"

The man before me is tall and broad, his skin of deep bronze with a day's growth of beard framing an expansive smile of perfect, white teeth.

"The name is Payne... Franklin Payne! Adventurer, explorer, scientist and honorary doctor in theo... blast all of that! Just call me Franklin and let's be done with it! So good to make your acquaintance."

I'm not sure why, but I think I'm going to like this fellow. "Well met, Franklin. I do hope you don't mind me taking up your time. What are you doing here in Black Root?"

"No, no, of course not! I don't mind at all!" He was very animated when he spoke, gesturing to and fro. "I'm just stopping in for supplies. That, and I've just added another head to my collection here in the

den." He gestured again, this time towards a collection of stuffed heads on the wall. "Finally bagged myself a Howling Bog Dweller up in the Dark Fens! 20 feet of him, and bloody tough, too! They almost shipped me home in an ice barrel!"

Franklin certainly was a rather interesting person to talk to. It seemed like he had a rather strong, perhaps unconscious, desire to never be boring. It mostly succeeded, even if he was rather wordy. "Why? What happened?" There were worse things to talk about than the man's crazy exploits.

Naturally, he was only too happy to indulge my curiosity. "Well, wouldn't you know it, my blunderbuss, Old Mary, gave up the ghost just as the beast was charging! Have you ever seen a raging Howler set his sights on you? Enough to give you a good case of the muckies! Ha!"

I'd never encountered a howler in all my travels through the Dark Fens, so there was actually a level of personal curiosity at what I'd missed. "And so? Out with it man!" I urged him to continue rather jovially, and with a grin he did.

"And so, I just turned Old Mary around, and used the stock as a club... things were hairy for a moment there, but I finally got the better of the fellow. And there you have it!"

He points to a shaggy head mounted on the wall.

"Smashing good time! Smelly bastard."

I glanced over at Vollinger and he started chuckling, remembering when he'd done the exact same thing for a similar reason. I turned back to Franklin, "You said you were stopping in for supplies? Supplies for what?" I was mighty curious where the renowned Franklin Payne would be heading next.

He shrugged casually, "Why, for whatever the next adventure is, my good friend! One can never be too prepared, you know! My kingdom for a compass, and all that! Ha! We're pushing off at first light! Or was it the day after tomorrow...? Whichever! It's a big world out there, full of mystery and danger... no time to waste!"

I got the impression he didn't actually have any idea where he was going next. That made a good bit of sense, really. "Well, while you're

here, would you mind telling me about some of your adventures?"

Virgil sighed impatiently, and I turned just in time to see Sebastian grabbing him around the shoulder for a rough one-armed hug. Franklin seemed to understand my companions' hesistance to listen to him ramble, "Adventures? Mine? Oh, there's really not much to tell. Bloody newspapers are always blowing these things out of proportion! You'd think they'd never heard of a man fighting a pair of Fire Giants with his bare hands! Standard fare, really... nothing you'd be terribly interested in..."

"Oh come now!" I scolded, "Tell me about the Fire Giants!"

"Alright! So there we were, Captain Teach and I... hundreds of miles away from the mainland, the bloody volcanic Serpent-Spin mountains belching lava above us, and the dreaded sea-snakes below, as big as the Gypsy Shadow herself. Half the men were on their knees on the deck, praying for a quick and painless death!"

Teach? You know captain Teach?! By the gods, man, get me in touch with him! I resolved to ask Franklin about contacting Teach after we were done with our conversation. "And so? What happened?"

As always, he was quite happy to elaborate for as long as I was happy to listen. "Well... I was there to get some fire gems, and so that's just what I was going to do! Unfortunately, the Fire Giants who owned them weren't being very cooperative. Have you ever spoken with a Fire Giant? Breath like the rear end of a Dreadhound bitch in heat! And bad grammar to top it off! Ha!

Well, like a complete idiot I'd forgotten Old Mary on the boat, and all I had was an old, rusted sword! I realized that was bloody useless after the first swing, so I tossed it aside. Now, normally I'd not resort to fisticuffs with a family of Fire Giants, but what was I to do?

"Well, with a bit of luck and a few well-placed blows, I was running back to the boat with a handful of fire gems! Enough to scare a man out of his skivvies, but a brilliant time all around! Ha! Wouldn't have missed it for the world!"

I was quite enjoying Franklin's fanciful method of storytelling.

"Fascinating. What about your other adventures? Tell me of the most valuable thing you've ever recovered."

"I don't know if you're a religious sort, but every now and again I'll do some work for the Panarii. They've always got work for a man who's not afraid to dirty his hands..."

Well, I'm not exactly a religious sort... but I've certainly done my fair share of work for the Panarii. "What sort of work have you done for the church...?"

Franklin continued to be accommodating. There were very few individuals that I could actually enjoy hearing a story from. Whether it was hogwash or not I didn't really care, at least it was entertaining. "Legend told that one of the barbarian tribes in the south worshipped a smooth, black rock, and the church got a burr in its bustle about it... they were convinced it was the Eye of Kraka-tur! And that's not just its name... it's really supposed to be the eye of the bloody demon! They say old Nasrudin popped it right out when he banished the bugger to the Void! Imagine that!"

I thought about telling Franklin that I ended up with that old rock in the end, but then thought better of it. It probably wasn't any concern of his what the church did with the eye after he retrieved it for them, though the fact that Hadrian had the eye in his possession did lend a peculiar veracity to Franklin's tale. "So... what did you do?"

He continued his story happily, "Well, you know how barbarians are... superstitious bunch... couldn't go to the loo in the morning without kissing the damned thing! So, needless to say, they weren't at all happy when I showed up dressed like one of their bone-nosed witch doctors and plucked it right from under their noses! The whole damned horde was after me!

So you see, I knew that close by was an ogre village. Bloody disagreeable bunch as well, and ogres aren't the most tolerant gents to begin with. So I ran as fast as I could, right through the ogre village, screaming obscenities and making a general nuisance of myself! And those ogres came out just as the barbarians were coming through! Ha! What a sight! I almost doubled over laughing! Brilliant!"

It was hard not to smile in return, given how much Franklin seemed to enjoy relating his odd little tales. "All right. What about your greatest battle ever?"

"Alright! Well, I was on the trail in Stillwater of that dreaded beast, the Stillwater Giant!"

NO! "Yes...?"

I could see where the story was going already, but that only made me that much more interested in it. "Somehow I'd been separated from my party, and I was searching a cave I found in the forest. And in the back of that cave I found a small, blue rabbit! Blue like a baboon's backside! Bloody strange, but I wasn't on the hunt for that sort of thing, so I turned to go..."

"Wait... don't tell me..." *By the gods, you'd swear he's lying through those perfect teeth of his the way he embellishes the stories so, but if he hadn't really encountered the giant he'd never have mentioned a blue bunny....*

"Yes! That's right!" He laughed, seeing the look on my face. "As soon as I turned, I heard something move behind me. Something BIG. So I looked back, and there standing in front of me was the most awful creature I've ever seen..."

I nodded, recalling my own similar experience, "Let me guess... huge, shaggy, big antlers on its head..."

"Too right! Ha!" He seemed happy to have my participation in his story. "This thing was terrible! Hairy bugger, and it smelled like a bloated Corpse Hog! A mouth full of teeth like foot-long razors, bloodstained claws on its hands and feet! Excuse the expression, madam, but I've got no problem telling you that I just about filled my union suit!"

Perhaps I was a bit too eager to hear more. I prodded him, "And so?" "So? This was the Stillwater Giant! He was my quarry, and nothing else mattered! My trusted blunderbuss, Old Mary, was all botched up, so I had only a small knife with which to kill the mythical beast! The fight raged for what seemed like hours! More than a match!" I nodded along, somewhat embarrassed. I supposed if I'd been lacking

my axe it would've been quite a battle indeed, but the Stillwater Giant really wasn't all that amazing. Franklin's way of telling it sure did make for a better story, though. "What happened?"

As if he had been waiting for me to ask, he continued, "Somehow, I got the upper hand! And just as I was about to dispatch the beast once and for all, the bugger changed back into a bloody rabbit and hopped away! Dash it! Of all the bad luck! Ha!"

"Well," I grinned wickedly, "Then you might be happy to know I actually killed it!" He raised his eyebrow at me and I grinned at him even more widely, launching into a story of my own, "I'd just recovered a fake replica pelt from H.T. Parnell's museum in Tarant and given it to a rather eccentric elf in exchange for the location of Qintarra, the tree city of the elves. I was on my way to Hardin's Pass along the route to the Glimmering Forest when I saw it... a peculiar, blue rabbit just hopping about in the snow..."

Franklin's eyes lit up as I told him my own story, and he was just as happy to listen as he was to ramble. "Please, do go on!"

It felt pretty damned good to be swapping tales of high adventure with the renowned Franklin Payne. "So I approached the rabbit, finding it rather oddly colored, especially considering it was hopping about in the snow... no sooner did I approach it then I watched it transform from a tiny rabbit into a huge, hideous beast! I was so shocked that it struck me a rather painful blow, painful enough to knock some damned sense into me and get my feet moving!

I darted around behind the beast, taking advantage of its naturally slow speed. My axe was out in seconds and I chopped at it furiously, afraid for my life should I give it even the slightest chance to strike at me again. At last I landed a powerful blow on its backside, cleaving clear through its flesh and separating its body into two pieces! It crumpled in the snow in a bloody mess, and I took to skinning it with my trusty dagger that I always have around for backup."

"You don't say? Good show, old girl! Good show! My hat's off to you, madam... any woman who has the backbone to face that monstrosity is a woman indeed! Well done!"

To me, it was that single bit of praise more than anything that told

me Franklin Payne was a true gentlemen. He did enjoy going on about his own stories, but that he so happily listened to my own was proof that he truly enjoyed adventure for his own sake, and telling stories about it was just an extension of that. "All right, all right... what about the most dangerous place you've ever been?"

He didn't even have to think before coming up with his response. "Oh! By far the most dangerous place I've ever been is the Isle of Thanatos!" *You don't say....* "They call it Monster Island, or some such, but what they should call the bloody place is Hell! Ha! I've never seen a more complete collection of the world's most abominably evil creatures in all my life! Words can't possibly describe the danger! Absolutely fantastic! Can't wait to go back!"

It's funny you should phrase it like that, my good man. "That's interesting. I just happen to be going there myself..."

"Really?" He seemed genuinely excited at that. "Brilliant! Sounds like a smashing good time! Hoist the Jolly Roger and all that! Good luck to you!"

He really was quite the happy fellow, but he just didn't quite get the point of my mentioning it. "You know, Franklin, I could use a man like you when I get there..."

"Eh? What's that? Me, going out to Thanatos? Now there's a smashing good idea, if I've ever heard one. I don't happen to have another expedition scheduled for a while... yes, that just might work out fine."

This is going to be really bloody interesting, now isn't it? "So... you'll come with me?"

"Why yes! I'd love to go!" He practically shouted in excitement. He continued talking as he ran about his house grabbing guns and gear. "I've been itching for another round or two with those Thanatos beasties anyhow! And I just might be a spot of help when it comes to navigating that bubbling cauldron of death! Right! To Thanatos it is...!"

"Say, Franklin," I began slyly, "You wouldn't happen to know of a good sea captain to take us there, would you?"

"Why how wonderful of you to ask!" He exclaimed, "I know just the gentleman! Let's head on down to the local bar on the docks and have a chat with old Captain Edward Teach! He does love to stop in here for a good ale more days than not."

"That sounds like a fantastic idea, Franklin. Thanks for the tip!" It looked like my arrival in Black Root had been quite fortuitous after all. In addition to finding a sea captain, I also found a rather talented, if verbose, guide to Thanatos. Things were looking up for a change. Well, as up as they could look when the destination was the most godforsaken island in the whole of Arcanum. At least Franklin would be sure to enjoy it.

Chapter the Sixtieth: When One Cannot Right One's Own Wrongs, Right Another's

I walked down to the bar on the docks, Franklin in tow, and was none too surprised to find one Captain Edward Teach sitting at a table and enjoying a tall, frothy glass of ale. Franklin wandered over to him enthusiastically, although he did have a tendency towards enthusiasm in very nearly everything he did. "Hello there, Captain Teach! I thought I'd find you here! I've brought a new friend."

Captain Teach looked over at me with ale-fogged eyes and smiled in recognition. "Well, well... if'n it isn't me old friend. A friendly face is what I be needin' to see, lassie. The days have been dark since last we sailed..."

I stepped forward, giving old Teach a smile of my own, "What's happened, Captain Teach...? You don't look yourself. For one, you're on land."

"Lost me boat, lassie! Went and got drunk one night, and found myself a-gamblin' with Killian Drake, an old sea captain who knows his way around a dice game. He played me, lassie... he played me for a fool and I lost me boat."

Played you a fool, eh? "Do you think he cheated?"

Teach shook his head negatively, "Oh, I don't know if'n old Drake's a cheat. He's just lucky... about the luckiest old sea-dog I ever did meet. I can't be callin' a man a cheat just because the dice landed his way."

Hmm... I'd love to take it back from him, but even I can't steal an entire damned ship, and I'm certainly no good at dice... perhaps I could persuade him...? "Well... maybe I could do you a favor and help out... though

I'd need to call on that favor mighty quickly."

He nodded, taking another swig of ale. "That's mighty nice of you, lassie. And you know if there's anything I can do for you, Old Teach'll do it..."

I suppose it's best to be up front about the matter, though if there's anybody in all of Arcanum that'll be willing to take us it'll be old Teach.

"Thank you. I need to get to the Island of Thanatos."

"Thanatos! That's even crazier than wanting to go to the Isle of Despair. But I'm figurin' it's important, and I know it's the way Mr. Bates would want me to treat ye. I suppose there are a couple of different ways ye might get there. One... you could buy a boat from the shipbuilder here in Black Root, which ain't cheap..."

Well, I certainly can't afford to buy my own damned boat... I'll never forget that time Frederick and I- ...oh, Frederick, it's been so long since I lost you and even still I'm thinking of you. "What are my other options?"

He shrugged, a helpless and pitiful gesture that showed how broken old Teach was without his ship, "You might be able to get a dice game with Old Drake, but he's no rubber-leg when it comes to the dice... he's lucky, and he plays for big stakes. I wouldn't be a'tossin' with him unless you feel REAL lucky. And he won't be a'playin' with just anyone. Old Drake knows a gambler when he sees one..."

I tossed the bartender a handful of coins, gesturing towards Teach's nearly-empty glass and he seemed to get the proper hint. "I'm terribly sorry, Teach, but I've really never been one to gamble. I'd love to help you, I really would... but... I'm not sure I can get your boat back from a man like that."

He drained the last of his ale and handed off the empty mug to the bartender as he arrived to set down a fresh one. "Well, there is one other thing... I'm a little leery of even mentionin' it... it's not somethin' I even like to think about, much less let spill outta me blowhole. But ye seem ta need some help..."

I felt terrible for being unable to do anything for Teach. At best, I could only hope that I'd have a boat leftover once I got back from

Thanatos, and then perhaps I could give it to old Teach in thanks. "I'd really appreciate any help you might be able to give..."

"Did I ever tell ye the story of how I came to own the Gypsy Shadow?"

It sounded like I was in for quite a tale. "No, you wouldn't tell me of it before..."

He took another swig of ale and set his mug down hard on the table. "Well, would ye like to hear it now?" I simply nodded. He cleared his throat and began, "Well, missy, by the time I could start growin' a beard, I'd sailed from one end of this land to the other, from the southern shores of Weeping Maidens to the northern ice-choked waters of the Jailer's Hump. Ain't nothin' of the sea I hadn't seen, and most of it twice..."

At the time, I was runnin' ale outta Caladon, for a mean and crusty old cap'n who went by the name a' Jack Skellybones. Half pirate and half devil, with the mouth of a blue-gilled she-demon and the breath to match. Jack used to drink so much that we'd pray for tailwinds... if the journey'd take too long, he'd start drinkin' the profits..."

I chuckled at the thought of such a man. "Sounds like quite a character..." For some reason it really didn't surprise me that Teach had been involved in smuggling goods out of Caladon. I didn't mind, it wasn't as though I was Caladon's most respectable citizen anyhow. "That be the truth, lassie. Jade would fight ye if'n he thought ye breathed on him wrong. He had more scars on his face than most men had all over, and he could tell ye the story from each one, and never were they the same. He was a hard man, but fair to his crew... and he loved the sea, lassie, almost as much as he loved his boat, the Gypsy Shadow..."

"Interesting..." *So, Teach got his boat from this Jack fellow, eh?* "What happened to him, Captain?"

He shuddered, a rather unusual gesture to be coming from a man like him, "Well, one night we was all drinkin' in this very tavern, the Sour Barnacle, and old Jack got real drunk... and started in with his stories. As the night got on, the tales got taller and we laughed harder, and we were all havin' a grand old time..."

Well, Jack had one too many, and started sayin' as to how he was the greatest pirate on the seas of Arcanum, and how if'n there was anyone who thought they were crustier, then he'd a'have something to say about it. He started a'spittin' and a'hollerin', and then, after upendin' every table in the place, he said that he was the greatest pirate who had EVER lived. Tougher than Ruby Dirk, and Black Sam Bellamy... and even meaner than Stringy Pete himself..."

Teach paused, looking at me to see if I followed. I could tell there was something I was missing, "Stringy Pete? Who's he?"

"I don't talk much about him. I'll just say that Stringy Pete was the meanest, cold-blooded, murdering pirate who ever put to sail, and be done with it. There are stories and legends, and most of 'em are true. He's been dead for more than two hundred years, and people still whisper his name when they talk about him..."

Wait... the very same pirate that desecrated the altar at Vooriden? By the Gods, I've heard of him after all! "I see. And what of Jack Skellybones?"

Teach shook his head sadly, continuing his story, "Well, after he said that, no one much felt like drinkin' after, and we put old Jack to bed. You see, a pirate is mean, but he knows what to be jokin' about, and blusterin' about... and a'callin' out to the ghost of Stringy Pete ain't one of 'em...

A week or so later we were out to sea, and it was the new moon so it was dark, and a strange westerly had appeared, and brought in a bank of low clouds, thick as lamb stew... and then we saw the other ship, just a'restin' off the starboard. Silent as death, and as still as if she was anchored... her sails tattered, her timbers rotted... and then we heard the screams...

"We found old Joachim in his cabin, with two daggers in him... one for each eye... and the sign of the evil eye carved into his chest. The very sign Old Stringy Pete used to leave on his victims. We ran out to see who was on the other boat, but it was gone, taking the clouds and the westerly with it."

Three years ago I'd have given you a funny look, Captain Teach, but now... now I'm rather inclined to believe you. "That's rather frightening..."

Teach sighed, finishing his story, "Bein' first mate, I took command, and ownership, of the Gypsy Shadow. I never seen that other boat, and I hope I never do."

I sincerely hoped that Teach wasn't saying what I thought he was saying. "I see... what does this have to do with getting to Thanatos?"

He took a rather long drink from his ale, slamming the mug down when he finished. "I'm sayin' I seen his boat, and I know it to be real! If you could get his boat, without gettin' yerself run-through by his ghost, you'd have yourself a boat..."

So it's either a game of dice, a small fortune, or chasing down an ancient, bloodthirsty pirate's ghost... why am I leaning towards the latter? "I was afraid you'd say that. How do you find a ghost pirate's boat?"

"Years ago, I found a secret cove. And there, on the beach, was an unmarked grave... unmarked except for the sign of the evil eye, which is the sign Stringy Pete used to carve on his victims. I got out of there fast, without even looking for treasure... that could have been the place where he was buried, and if'n it was, it's said most spirits return to their graves..."

It was as good of a place to search as any, or at least that's what I told myself. It wasn't true by any stretch of the imagination, but I was never one to take a more direct approach anyhow. "At the very least I might find some clues..."

He stared at me for several moments, taking another swig of ale, "Yes, lassie, I agree. Here... I'll mark your map with the location of the cove." I handed my map to him and he jotted a piratey 'X' onto it. "Looks like you've got precious few options, and I don't like any of 'em, but good luck!"

I stood up from the table and tossed a few more coins at the bartender in thanks to Teach. "Thanks, Captain. I'll keep you abreast of the situation." I lingered only long enough to make sure the ale made it to the right person, and then I was off.

"So, let me get this right," Franklin pondered aloud, "Instead of going straight to Thanatos, we're going to trek halfway around the

continent in search of the most bloodthirsty pirate bastard that ever lived... and then, if we should find him, we're to somehow convince him to let us use his ship without getting ourselves run through in the process?"

I stopped briefly at the train station, before purchasing tickets, "I think that's a rather accurate summary of our plans, yes. I could stop by and fetch you when we're ready to go to Thanatos if this little detour doesn't much interest you."

"Quite the opposite!" His voice thundered with that strange extreme of enthusiasm that seemed wholly unique to Franklin Payne. "This sounds like a smashing good time! Why, that pirate bastard is likely to try and slaughter the whole lot of us! Wonderful!"

If it had been anybody else, I would've mistook his words as sarcasm. "I'm glad to have you along, Mr. Payne." I grinned.

"Please, madam! Just call me Franklin!" We continued chatting even as I purchased tickets for the whole lot of us. I didn't want to waste any more time than completely necessary, and travel by rail was the quickest way to get around the Gulf of Morbihan.

"Fair enough, Franklin... and you can just call me Samantha." I handed our tickets to the conductor, and he directed us to our seats on the train.

"That sounds like a fair trade! Samantha it is!" It seemed like Franklin was going to make a fine addition to our strange little group. Virgil seemed a tad hesitant towards him, but he certainly amused Sebastian and Vollinger, and even Terry seemed to take a liking to him. We shared a very pleasant train ride the whole way to Tarant, and then made off towards the spot Teach marked on my map.



It was a long journey by foot, but there wasn't any shorter way to go about it without a boat of our own. Since we wouldn't really have need to bother if we had a boat in the first place, travel by foot was just the way it had to be. Franklin carried with him a rather surprising amount of supplies, taking well to the open plains. I'd expect no less from a man of his caliber. In turn, he seemed to be suitably impressed with how well traveled the rest of us were.

It took over two weeks of travel, but at last we finally arrived at our destination just as the sun reached its peak in the sky. The first thing I noticed when we arrived was a rather tiny rowboat tied just off the shore. Franklin looked at it, then pulled out a looking glass and stared across the water, "I say, there seems to be a rather tiny island Southwest of here! What say we check it out, eh Samantha?"

"That sounds grand." I smiled, hopping into the boat. Sebastian stared at the boat nervously as Virgil and Vollinger gently stepped in. At last Terry jumped aboard and gave an excited 'woof' at Sebastian, finally convincing him to join us.

In less than ten minutes we were already on the other side. Sebastian hopped out first, shuddering nervously, "I don't mind ships and the like, but I gotta tell you, I really hate those tiny little boats. Feels like they're gonna flip over any second and... I don't know how to swim."

I winked at him as I stepped out, "Come now, Sebastian... I'm sure Terry would save you if that happened." Franklin laughed uproariously, and Sebastian just gave Terry an odd look. He seemed to realize that I was probably right... it was so like Terry to do something like that.

We passed by a grave filled with loose dirt, and on it I saw the very symbol that teach had mentioned... the evil eye, drawn in a clear line in the dirt. The dirt had obviously been freshly disturbed, and yet that symbol somehow remained... I nervously looked up towards the opposite beach and there, standing on the docks, I saw him. I shuddered uncontrollably, but forced myself to move forward. *I've dealt with plenty of bad things before, and if I don't go through with this I might have to deal with Arronax himself... Stringy Pete might be horrible,*

but he's got nothing on Arronax.

You see a spirit in front of me. It is a skeleton, dressed in tattered rags with a large black hat, and wielding an evil-looking saber. Its eyes glow with an unholy light.

"Arrgghh... who be treading upon me grave? Who be tryin' to get their hands on me treasure? Prepare to die, ye landlubbing goat-bugger... no one sees the evil eye of Old Stringy Pete and lives!"

If nobody sees the bloody eye and lives, then how does anybody know it's the symbol of Stringy Pete? Answer me that one, you ego-inflated sack of bones. As irked as I was, I had to tread carefully. I didn't itch for a good fight anywhere near as badly as Franklin, and I wanted to deal with the ghost peacefully if at all possible. "Wait! I'm not here to take anything! I just want to talk!"

"Talk? What would a rubber-legged bilge-fish like you want to be a talkin' about with the ghost a Stringy Pete?" His words were full of ire, but his ghostly tone shifted to a more easy one, and I could tell my words were having a soothing effect. "I been a sailin' the seas of Arcanum for more'n two-hundred years, and I drink blood ale and gnaw on the bones a priests and maidens! I not be a'lookin' to talk...!"

Your tone says otherwise. "Please, I just need a moment to explain."

He continued his rant, refusing to back down. "To explain? What ye be needin' to explain, lassie? Ye be diggin' around me bones and lookin' for me treasure! To a pirate, that be worse than a' findin' ye baitin' yer hook with me wife!" *What kind of bloody euphemism is that?*

It seemed like being polite wasn't going to get me much of anywhere, which I really should have expected. I had to knock him off-guard if I expected to get around his silly bravado. Leave it to an undead pirate to be so damned concerned about his reputation. "Look, I'm only here because I need your boat!"

"Me boat! I cared for me wife less than this boat! Why in the name of all that's unholy would I give ye me boat? Yer speakin' gibberish, and I've had more than an earful of it... a soul as tormented as mine has got little patience for the blubberings of the living..."

That's the opening I was looking for... I knew that being bold would pay

off. "Tormented? Don't you enjoy being a bloodthirsty pirate ghost?"

The fire in his eyes dimmed a little and he now seemed truly shocked... or as shocked as an animated skeleton could seem anyway. "Enjoy it? Are ye daft, missy? I was the crustiest, meanest, most blood-thirsty pirate who ever lived, and none of what I did when I was alive compares to the things I've seen dead..."

I coaxed the words out of him expertly, my skill at persuasion and negotiation guiding my speech. "What is it that you see?"

Like a child confessing his worst nightmares to his mother and begging her to protect him, Stringy Pete spoke. "I see all the souls a' the dead who walk this world, and I see the souls a' all me victims, and they torment me as I still be a' tormentin' the living... and it be their pain I feel every day and every night on these glassy seas, an their dead eyes that be starin' out at me from their murky depths..."

It looked like I'd found my way to the old bastard's boat. He certainly wouldn't need it after I removed him from the world, and if he wanted to be removed, well then it was an easy bargain. The hard part would be convincing whoever cursed him to finally put him to rest, if such a man even still lived. "I see. And who had you cursed to this fate?"

"I cursed meself! I spilled the blood of innocents, desecrated holy places, and... the worst thing I ever did... broke a pirate's blood oath. Even without the first two, I deserved what I got because of the last. I shouldn't even call meself a pirate, after the things I did..."

It was so terribly unbecoming of a pirate to hear him whine so, though I supposed that 200 years of torture was enough to break any man's spirit. "So you're saying you don't want to be here...?" It was an obvious question, but I needed to make things crystal clear if I expected to negotiate properly.

He very nearly growled, the fire in his eyes flaring up briefly before dying down again, "No! But I've got no choice! I was cursed, lassie, cursed from the day I died to sail the seas forever, a' hauntin' those souls who be takin' my name in vain, to strike terror in the pure a' heart, to be givin' little ones nightmares..."

...and you suppose by repeating the things that got you cursed in the first place, you're going to be rid of the curse? I don't think it works like that, old chap. "Is there any way to break this curse?"

That really caught him unawares, and the fire in his eyes all but went out. "Break the curse?" He sat there silently, contemplating it. It seemed like such a simple thought hadn't even occurred to him amidst his 200 year rampage of terror. "And why would ye want to do that, lassie? Why would one such as ye want to be helpin' the evil ghost a' old Stringy Pete?"

I grinned wickedly, "Your boat, Cap'n. I need your boat. There's not a soul in all Arcanum that wants to set sail to the Island of Thanatos, and if I want to go then I have to get my very own boat." Pete stared at me, the fire in his eyes returning, and I tried to elaborate. "Arronax is returning, Pete. An entire clan of dwarves was banished to the void to build a machine that will weaken the wards and let him back into Arcanum. I have to do what I can to stop him. I don't know what I'll find on Thanatos, but I know my answers lie there..."

"That be quite a story... and one I'd not be inclined to believe when I was flesh 'n' blood. But shatter me squid's beak if'n I haven't seen stranger things since. Perhaps there is something we might do here..." There I had it, the beginnings of striking a bargain with an ancient, bloodthirsty pirate. Franklin clapped me on the shoulder jovially. It seemed like he could appreciate my skill with words, and the strange places I was taking him. "Any help you might have would be greatly appreciated, Cap'n."

"Well, I can't be givin' up this boat on account a' the curse... it be my fate to sail these old timbers until the end a' time." He stared at me and I nodded at him to continue. I knew where he was going, and I was willing to accept that. "But I know a way we might break that curse, if ye'd be willin' to do a little leg-work..."

Leg-work was practically my middle name. I ran errands for everybody else in Arcanum, why not do a little work for an ancient horror? "I might... what needs to be done?"

He placed a bony hand on his chin, the fires in his eyes dimming as he thought further. "Well, there be three things, if'n my suspicions are

correct. Three wrongs to right, and the curse will be broken..."

I shrugged, "Well, we've got to start somewhere. Tell me about the first."

"The first be an easy task. I told ye, I killed many an innocent in me time. One was a good 'n' pure man by the name of Jonas Williamson. Killed him for the silver buckles on his boots, but mostly for the sport of it. I laughed while he bled into the gutter, crying out to me that I spare his family."

By the Gods, man...! "That's pretty vicious, Pete. How do you make that right?"

He seemed to stammer a bit, realizing all the more exactly why he'd been cursed to such a torturous fate. "Well... his family... they fell on hard times without him, and the Williamsons been poor ever since. You'll need to dig up my treasure, includin' those silver buckles, and give it to whoever is left a' the Williamsons... my treasure is buried a little north of here..."

I pulled out my map and showed it to him. He glanced at it and pointed to a spot not too far from where we were. "...and where are the Williamsons?" He pointed to a second location, on the east coast of Arcanum, not too far south of Ashbury.

There seemed to be genuine regret in his voice regarding his unfortunate past. "I know they still live there. I've sailed by there in the years since I died... it not be a nice place..."

"I see." It was difficult for me to have any kind of sympathy for the old bastard. I was all business. "Is there anything else?"

"Yes... don't be thinkin' you can keep some of the treasure for yeself... these curses, they be old and smart, and if ye be tryin' to cheat 'em, then I'm still gonna be sailin' these seas, and then I'm gonna be a-comin' after ye! Savvy that, lassie?"

What kind of... do you really think I would even consider keeping your... all right, I suppose that was a fair warning after all. "Of course. Moving along... what about the second task?"

He hesitated just a little bit. "That might be a little more complicated..." I sat there patiently, waiting for him to continue. "There be a temple in the hills just off the Gulf a' Morbihan, in a little town called Vooriden, and many years ago I was a'pillagin' the surrounding countryside, and I broke into the place, and stole some holy relics, and desecrated their sacred altar. And sure enough, those old monks threw a curse on me..."

Well, if all I have to do is replace that old altar... though I must say, I hardly figured I'd be helping a bastard like you when I did it. "What needs to be done...?"

For once, even old Pete seemed a bit embarrassed. "They didn't care about the holy relics, but I be thinkin' they might'a got their robes in a bundle over the altar. Ye see, I spilled some wine and ale all over it, and I might'a even relieved meself on it. It'd been a long night, ye know..."

"I can see where they might have a problem with that..." *Problem enough to not even use the altar for the last 200 years, in fact.* "Yeah, they weren't a-singin' hymns when we left. Anyways... that altar of theirs... I think it needs to be replaced... you'll have to talk with the monks there to find out what needs be done... savvy? Here's where the temple is..."

He shows me on my map.

I shook my head, "That's not going to be a problem. I've already replaced their altar for the current head of the priesthood, a gnome by the name of Edwin Wallows. I borrowed his ogre laborer, a rather brainless chap, and journeyed all the way to the Stonewall Mountains for a great hunk of stone from Torin Quarry. They used that stone to carve up a replacement altar right away."

His eyes lit up, quite literally, and the tone of his voice improved considerably. "Ye have! Looks like the stars are shinin' down on this old evil pirate for once, lassie! That's one less thing ye need to do!"

It's not that I don't need to do it so much as I already did it for different reasons. "Good, Pete. Now, the third task..."

"The last task will be the most difficult." *Well, that's just great... though*

I suppose the altar is done, and digging up some treasure ought not be too difficult. "Ye see, as I was gettin' on in years, there was nothin' I hadn't done, and nowhere I hadn't sailed, and no treasure I hadn't laid me hands on." Please. Spare me the bragging. "There was only one thing I wanted, and I wasn't even sure if'n it existed, and I made it me business to find out..."

I tapped my foot impatiently on the wooden dock beneath my feet. "What was it?"

He didn't seem to be at all proud to answer my question. "The Bangellian Scourge... the most evil piece a' weaponry ever wielded by any soul in the land a' Arcanum. Legend says it was forged in the blood fires a' the Bangellian Deeps, and that virgins and children were thrown into the fire to keep it stoked..."

Virgins and children? Do they just make up the most horrible things they can just to make it sound that much worse? Actually, that's probably exactly what they do... it's like my discussion with Jyheirad regarding L'anamelach. "That's horrible..." I tried to sound as though I actually believed what he was saying.

"Horrible" don't even come close. It be said that the Bane of Kree cut down a whole battalion of Elven warriors with it before he was banished, and that Lorek wielded it during the Dwarven Clan Wars, and that any but the most evil of people die at the mere sight of it..."

So if the legends are true, I can't even do this for you.... I might be a horrendous wench, but I'm no Lorek, nor am I the Bane of Kree. That legend was probably as true as the legend saying that anybody that saw the evil eye of Stringy Pete had to die. "Sounds like an evil blade..."

He nodded with shame, "Yes, missy... and an evil blade it be. I wanted it more than anything in all of Arcanum. And I planned on gettin' me hands on it.... At the time I had me a crew of seven a' the most black-hearted and soulless pirates, and they all agreed it was a fine piece a' treasure to go after, and we took a pirates blood-oath to stand by one another and share in the treasure. And so we searched Arcanum for it, and found it one day we did... in the swamps of the Dark Fens, down in the Bangellian Deeps..."

Gods, the Dark Fens... I only scratched the surface of that place before and I'd rather not go back. Well, I suppose if I can't handle that then Thanatos ought be right out. "And then?"

If a skeleton could possibly sweat, I imagined he would've been doing it just then. "It'd been buried there for centuries... a beautiful sight... its blade as black as onyx, and carved in ancient runework, and I held it in me hands, and it CALLED to me..."

"What did you all do with it?" *Aside from horrendously evil acts that only made you deserve your curse all the more.*

"We ALL did nothing, lassie. That night, when everyone was asleep, that cursed blade twisted my mind, and it told me that my crew was mutinous, looking to get rid of me. And so, I killed them all in their sleep, missy... cut all their throats from ear to ear. When I woke in the mornin', and seen what I'd done, I threw the blade down and ran right out of there."

I was impressed... a blade even more evil than Stringy Pete himself, that caused him to do acts even he found disgusting. "And the Bangellian Scourge?"

He shuddered, which was an odd sight. A skeleton showing such a human emotion somehow seemed even stranger than it talking. "It still lies there, as far as I know. Among the murdered bones a' me crew. You must destroy that evil blade... at the bottom of the cave that we found it in is a great furnace. Toss it in there, and let the world be done with it. Here's where the Deeps be..." He stretched a bony arm out and I held my map up again. He pointed to a place not far to the north of the Bedokaan village.

I stuffed the map back into my purse and looked up. "That's all three tasks, then... and I've already done one of them. Is there anything else I need to know?"

"Ah, that's all, lassie. Will ye help me? Ifn ye do these things, I give ye me word as a pirate that I'll give ye me ship. She's old, but there's not a better vessel that ever sailed Arcanum's seas..."

It felt decidedly odd to make an agreement with old Pete, especially in light of his past oathbreaking. It seemed like a good way to get double-crossed, but at least I'd be doing the world a bit of good with

my actions. I was sure Franklin would enjoy the adventure as well.
"I'll do it."

His eyes lit up happily, but I couldn't quite tell if it was because he'd fooled me or if he was genuinely sorry. "I wish ye luck on yer quests, lassie. If'n ye finish these tasks, then return here... I'll give ye me boat, and me thanks..."

"I'll do that, Pete..." *...and I'll just bloody hope that your thanks doesn't come at the end of a blade.* My first destination was where Stringy Pete had hidden his treasure. It was nearby, at the very least. *I swear to the Gods, Pete, if you murder me I am not going to be happy about it.*

Chapter the Sixty First: Good Deeds and Horrible Beasts

"I say, now that was a bit of an unexpected agreement. Fantastic!" Franklin was easy to please.

Virgil was finally starting to warm up to the old boy, too. "All the more adventure for us, right? We got to meet the ghost of Stringy Pete and now we'll be traveling to the Bangellian Deeps."

"Why, that's brilliant! You're absolutely right! I'm liking this group more and more..." At least Franklin's loyalty was obvious. As long as I continued venturing into the darkest, most horrible pits of Hell he would be all too happy to continue following along. He was a bit scrawny, but not too shabby with a gun, so the help was much appreciated.

Stringy Pete's treasure was only about half a day's journey away, so we arrived just before nightfall.

For whatever strange reason there were hostile apes roaming around nearby. I might've expected zombies or really any form of tortured undead to haunt the treasure site, but certainly not monkeys. I was well prepared to defend myself, however, so I did what I had to and continued onward.

The treasure seemed to be loosely buried in the center of a circle of rock. If the very idea of an ancient pirate's cursed, ill-gotten gains didn't already make me leery enough of the situation, there were bones scattered about near the burial site. I didn't know if they were the bones of past adventurers trying to take Stringy Pete's treasure from him or if Pete had found a grave in the middle of nowhere, desecrated it for fun, then buried his treasure where the body was. In the end it didn't really matter, I had to dig it up.

Looks like it's all here... complete with the damned silver boot buckles. Of all the bloody reasons to kill a man... really now... I gave the treasure to Sebastian to carry and tossed the buckles loosely on top. He shrugged and grabbed it from me, not really being bothered by the whole affair. I figured if any of us wouldn't mind carrying around a cursed chest it would be him. Sebastian didn't really mind much of anything.



Truly, he complained very little as we walked. Our path took us just past the ruins of Kree. We could see the crumbling walls on the horizon as we walked further towards the shore. It was a sad sight... Kree must have been quite magnificent back when it still stood. I regretted that the technology for pictures did not exist back in the Age of Legends. Then again, the Age of Legends was called such because of the triumph of magick, and Kree likely would not have been the same if it hadn't been for that. It was an interesting contradiction, at any rate.

The Williamson homestead was run-down and filthy. The quality of the land was poor and it showed signs of being overworked. Despite being so close to the eastern shores the plants were parched and dying. I saw a poor woman wandering around the homestead in a shabby, old dress. She didn't seem to pay me much mind as I approached. "Excuse me, madam. Might I ask who you are?"

She glanced over at my companions, forming an opinion of our little traveling group before answering. "My name is Molly Williamson, ma'am." She had a thick, country accent fairly well removed from the proper speech of city folk.

"A pleasure, Molly." I tried to sound polite despite the aversion I was

beginning to feel. At the very least I brought good news. "What are you doing out here, anyway?"

"Well ma'am... it's cheap livin' out here in the middle of nowhere. We eat what we pull outta the ocean, make all our own clothes, and beyond that we don't need a whole lot. The Williamson clan ain't never had a whole lot of money. Not since what happened to my great-granddaddy Jonas Williamson, anyhow..."

I coughed uncomfortably. "Actually, that's uh... that's why I'm here..."

She arched a curious eyebrow in my direction. "What are you talking about?" At least she wasn't afraid of me... that would've only made things even more awkward.

"Er, I know this sounds strange, but..." It was difficult to find the words to describe just what an incredible oddity the whole thing was. I supposed, even if she didn't buy into my reasons, the woman would be more than happy to take the treasure off of Sebastian's hands. "Uh, you see... I made a bargain with Stringy Pete's ghost... he's been cursed to live in torture forever, and breaking that curse requires making up for his past wrongs. If I help him break that curse, then he will die and I can take his boat... which I need. So, the first thing he's asked me to do is to bring your family his hidden treasure... complete with the boot buckles he stole from your great grandfather, Jonas."

Well if I'm not babbling like a fool...

"Well I'll be!"

The woman shakes her head.

"I've heard strange tales, and I've heard strange tales. Yours takes the cake, ma'am. To think that that old pirate wants to make good what he done almost two hundred years ago..."

I cleared my throat again, uncomfortably. "Yes, it is a bit unbelievable..."

She looked over at Sebastian, noticing more fully what he was carrying. "So... you brung me that old treasure and the buckles?"

I nodded, then motioned to Sebastian. "Yes." Sebastian walked forward and set the chest on the ground in front of her, the silver boot buckles tumbling unceremoniously to the ground. He wiped his hands clean and smiled at the woman before walking back to my side.

She shrugged, hopelessly confused but accepting all the same. "Well, thank you. I suppose old Stringy Pete ain't such a bad bugger after all. Good bye, madam..." I tried not to laugh. *'Ain't such a bad bugger after all', eh? He only killed your great grandfather for sport and terrorized countless others... but he's not so bad, now that he wants to stop being tortured himself, right?*

"Good bye," I curtsied lightly and the six of us left her humble little homestead. Once we were a good distance away I sighed heavily, "Well, at the very least that woman and her family will have an easy life from now on. Stringy Pete or no, we've done something good."

"Yes," Virgil smiled, "That we have."

We journeyed to Ashbury, nearby to the north, mostly because it was the closest town. Franklin was a bit eager and while we rested he decided to go chatting up the various sea captains, looking for a ride to Thanatos. It was a fool's errand, and even he knew it from the beginning, but he felt it better than resting in an inn room for the night. Needless to say, he came back empty-handed, and utterly thrilled for that fact. "Even if it's a long trip, we're off to the Bangellian Deeps! There's bound to be a whole bloody pack of vicious, bloodthirsty creatures just waiting to tear our eyes straight out from our skulls! I can't wait!" *Ah, Franklin... always the optimist.*

In the morning we purchased train tickets to Tarant, trying to cut what little we could out of our journey. Ultimately, Tarant wasn't exactly close to the Dark Fens, but even cutting a few days off of our journey was more than welcome. The grasslands were so damned bloody boring anyhow. As much as it made me feel like Franklin to think as much, it was just so dull when the worst thing we could really encounter there was a pack of orcish thugs... I didn't even have assassins ambushing me any longer. Once we arrived in Tarant we began our trek up to Stillwater.

I'd made the journey between Tarant and Stillwater multiple times, and nothing much about it really changed. The scenery was a sight better than the eastern grasslands, but that wasn't saying much at all. It always got so damned cold as I neared Stillwater, and I never had

the presence of mind to remember to put my armor on before it became like ice. We stopped in Stillwater just long enough to warm up in a cheap inn room, and for me to change into my armor lest I continue to suffer.

From there, it still took us two weeks to travel through Hardin's Pass and then northward to the Dark Fens. The creatures in the pass were still quite disagreeable, though Franklin didn't seem bothered by it in the slightest. None of the beasts were impressive enough for him to collect as trophies, but he enjoyed the thrill of battle all the same. The Glimmering Forest was peaceful by comparison, and thankfully warmer. The ambient magickal energy amidst the trees no longer made me feel as uncomfortable as it used to, and thus I was able to enjoy that leg of the journey all the more.

I stopped in the Bedokaan village rather briefly, making a second offering to the god Makaal. The feeling of his blessing did not change, though that I could feel it anew suggested it truly had waned when I'd been blessed by Halcyon. In turn, I took a rather sizeable detour to make a second offering to Kerlin as well. *Two to go, and then I begin my search for Velorien...* Franklin didn't seem overly pleased at our month long detour, but the strangeness of my pilgrimage intrigued him enough to hold his interest until it was done.



At long last we made for the Bangellian Deeps. There was much anticipation as to exactly what we would find there, but we were all aware that it wouldn't be good. "I don't like this one bit," Virgil lamented, "but I'll stand by you regardless. Together, we can handle whatever comes at us."

"That's the spirit!" Sebastian cheered. "Samantha hasn't steered us wrong yet, I trust her. If anything does go wrong, I know she'll be the

first one out in front, taking on the brunt of whatever comes at us with or without our help. How could we do anything besides stand by and help out where we can?" Terry woofed in agreement and Sebastian started petting him.

I tossed Terry a piece of jerky and he devoured it hungrily. "Thanks for the sentiment, guys. I do aim not to get us all killed."

"Now where's the fun in that?!" I surely hoped Franklin was joking. "I jest, I jest!" He laughed when he saw the look on my face. "You're quite a woman to have inspired this rag tag group to such a rousing display of loyalty. I'll throw my hat in the ring, as well! Good show, woman!"

"Uh... Thanks, Franklin... I think." He laughed more at my uncertainty. One thing was for sure, he was a hard man to offend in any fashion. I rather liked that about him.

When we arrived at the Bangellian Deeps we were greeted by bones littering the entranceway and horrible grunts and screams from inside. The screams took on an otherworldly tone and I shuddered at the thought of just how many people would have to die in the same hellhole to cause such a horrid noise. We wound our way throughout the twisting, uneven caverns cautiously.

A horrid little spider leapt out at me as I rounded one corner. It sunk its pincers into my flesh and I felt my entire leg burn as it injected a massive dose of its horrible poison. I swatted at it helplessly with my axe several times when Franklin, Sebastian, and Vollinger managed to bring it down from a distance. "Hold still, please. I'll take care of that nasty poison," Virgil scolded.

After his second failed attempt it was my turn to scold him, "Don't waste your efforts on me... save it for yourself and Terry. I think I've got some antidote powder around here somewhere." I rummaged around in my purse and pulled out a rough sack, untying the thick cord that sealed the precious powder inside. I patted it liberally on the wound the spider gave me and instantly began to feel better as my body absorbed the substance. I patted a bit more on before re-sealing the bag and climbing back to my feet. "Thanks for trying,

though, Virgil." I tried to force a smile. He merely shrugged.

After only another few short corners I came face to face with yet more gargantuan rock beasts, as though I hadn't seen enough of those in my lifetime already. "Fantastic!" Franklin shouted, leveling his blunderbuss, "What in blazes is that thing?! Come on, you oversized bastard, let's get to it already!" He fired at it and it charged us.

Thanks, Franklin. Really. I ran forward, slipping behind it easily and chopping it apart just as effortlessly. Franklin fired his gun at the farther of the two, but the noise attracted even more unwanted attention. More spider creatures snuck out from around the rocks by the nearby lava pool and began crawling towards me menacingly.

The gunners turned, focusing on the spiders instead after seeing what the last one did to me. I ran around them towards the remaining hunk of rock and buried my axe into its back solidly. It turned angrily with a surprising speed and my axe slipped away from me along with it. I growled angrily, deftly dodging around its stony fists. Vollinger's gun rang out and a small bit of stone chipped off of the creature's backside. While it was distracted I dove between its legs, springing up to my feet on the other side. I grabbed ahold of my axe tightly and kicked off of its back, freeing my blade.

As it turned back towards me I swung again, chopping the damned thing's arm off at the shoulder. It groaned, a deep and earthy groan, then slammed to the ground with a thud. I looked back towards the spiders, but none of them moved any longer. Sebastian, not content to believe the stony bastard was dead yet, fired one last shot, blowing its head clear off its body.

The six of us continued onward through the passageways, having little choice in the matter. There was but a single path throughout the horrible caverns, and it was wrought with all manner of horrid beasts and dangerous traps. Franklin was utterly thrilled. As we progressed deeper and deeper the beasts took on a more lethal, magickal bent. Facing a mage would've been one thing, we were well protected against spells. Magickal beasts were another threat entirely. One could not very well will a magickal beast out of existence, no matter how horrible, and rapping one on the snout with my anti-magical

shield would only serve to anger it.

A spirit wrought completely in flames lumbered after me, swinging its spindly, flaming arms in anger. I narrowly dodged one of its strikes, cursing at how bloody difficult the bastard was to confront. My skin burned from being so close, and I danced off to the side to get away from the damned thing. I hefted my axe, knowing that my strike would have to be a solid one when fighting a beast made of pure fire. I slipped around to the creature's backside, reeling at the intensity of the heat upon my skin. It burned horribly, even through my armor, but I pressed on despite it. I struck a mighty blow against the damned creature, bringing it down in but a single hit.

From then on we fought more flaming beasts, and even several dragonlike creatures. My axe cut through all mercilessly, though admittedly the gunners had significantly better luck with the flaming creatures than I. Given the poor shape of my armor and the wounds I suffered even when emerging victorious against them, I was only too happy to let Franklin have his fill of combat when we encountered anything flaming. *I might be a master of melee and dodging, but when the bastard I'm fighting is actively on fire it bloody hurts.*

I focused my efforts on the dragonlike creatures, some of which I had previously encountered in the Lair of Bellerogrim, and others which were unique to the hellhole known as the Bangellian Deep. It was odd for me to have such faith in my companions after such a long time of trying to do everything myself, but if I didn't rely on them to some degree I would never survive such a horrible place. Despite my initial apprehension, it felt good to place my trust in them... and for them to live up to that trust. I felt like we were a true group of friends, no matter how short or long each of us had been traveling together. *...but what about you, Vollinger? Can I still rely on you? Could I ever?* I felt bad for even thinking it, especially considering he hadn't truly failed me yet. I was making an awful lot of fuss over something he might one day have done.

At last I rounded the final corner and came face to face with a cursed warrior and his own group of 'friends'. His armor was made of deep crimson and in his hands he wielded the blackest blade I have ever laid eyes on. The blade itself made a horrible wailing noise as it

sailed through the air, and I could feel the evil power radiating from it. I knew in my heart it was what I had come to destroy.

I charged into the room without thinking, deftly dodging past the inept swing of the cursed paladin that wielded the blade. I could hear - and feel - the keen wailing of the blade as it slipped by my head. My axe was in my hands in a moment, laying into the bastard without mercy. I didn't want to find out what would happen if I were cut by that horrible blade, so I fought as though my life depended on it. In truth, it probably did.

My axe tore straight through the paladin's armor, cracking and splintering it even as my blade continued to cut and burn his flesh. He was a paragon of evil, and I was a demon of barbaric justice. At last he fell to the ground, his wicked blade sticking point-first into the cavern floor, easily cutting through the rock it landed on. I shuddered uncontrollably and continued my assault against the nearest one of his slaves. In only a single strike my axe managed to cut through his armor as well, and he went toppling to the ground.

The remaining slaves scattered, afraid. Here they were, in the heart of the Bangellian Deeps, serving alongside a man carrying the most horrific blade in existence... and of all the things to be afraid of, they were afraid of a woman with a perfectly mundane axe. Terry darted into the room and leapt at one of them, latching his jaws around the bastard's neck. Blood spilled out of the slave's helmet in copious amounts, and slowly his strangled scream faded to a pathetic gurgle. His body fell to the ground, Terry landing on top of it and tearing out one last hunk of flesh before setting his sights on the next target.

Virgil dashed over towards the third slave, swinging out with his axe but being deflected by the thick armor. Vollinger's gun rang out and punched a solid hole in it, and Franklin made a few holes of his own. I heard a rather unfortunate 'click' and then Franklin began cursing. Out of the corner of my eye I saw him run up, wielding Old Mary like a club and letting forth a most profound string of curses as he did so. Terry followed along and at last even Vollinger shrugged, running up and sealing the bastard in the corner he'd run to.

The fourth slave was clawing at the furnace, trying to open it for

some nefarious purpose. I didn't care to wait long enough to find out what that purpose was and I charged after him, easily bringing him low with another two strikes from my axe.

I heard another terrified scream from the corner where the others were gathered and looked over just in time to see the bastard get torn to bloody pieces by Terry's vicious assault. I winced when I saw bits of his flesh being torn off and thrown aside while he looked down in horror at the lupine terror chewing him to pieces. At long last he finally bled to death, his scream dying out slowly while the life left his body. Terry turned to seek out yet another target, but Sebastian was already on it.

He aimed that strange gun I gave him at the last slave, a glowing, green orb floating menacingly towards the corner. When the orb contacted the slave's armor it slipped straight through it, the dim green light no longer showing off of the walls. An ear-piercing scream issued forth from underneath the armor and I could hear a sickeningly wet crunch. The armor shook violently, blood pouring out of its cracks, and at last it fell onto the ground in pieces, empty. I shuddered uncomfortably and turned to fetch the horrible blade. I wasn't going to leave it sit there for even a single moment longer than I had to.

I stood over the blade, staring at it with disgust, then looked over towards the furnace. Virgil had his hand on the handle and he nodded at me reassuringly. I reached down and picked up the blade, feeling it burn horribly as it contacted my flesh. I'd never felt a magickal reaction so potent that it actually caused me physical harm, yet despite all of my recent tinkering this blade could manage it. I gritted my teeth, feeling my flesh sear and stick to the blade's grip, and I yanked it forth from the rock. I ran, in spite of the pain, with all of the speed I could muster. As I neared the furnace, Virgil opened it for me. I brought my axe out with my other hand, striking it against the blade to free it from my hand. I growled in pain, feeling my flesh rip off of my hand forcefully, but it was done.

The blade fell into the furnace and a sound like a thousand whispers began to seep out of the furnace. I couldn't see them, but I could hear and feel the spirits of the poor bastards killed in the blade's making

finally being freed at last. I pulled a salve out of my purse, rubbing it gently against my hand while the spirits whispered their cries of freedom and departed the room. I looked up at the others, "Let's get the bloody hell out of here."

"As much fun as I've had in this hellish place, I am inclined to agree with you!" Franklin said cheerily. "Let us tell Stringy Pete the good news and pray he plans to betray us most violently!" *If it's all the same to you, I'll pray for him to hold up his end of the bargain.*



The journey from the Bangellian Deepes all the way back down to Stringy Pete's cove was a long one and there was no good shortcut, but at least if everything went well I would have a way to get to Thanatos. Of all the crazy things I'd ever done, I had to say that sailing off to Thanatos being the outcome where everything 'went well' was probably one of the most ludicrous. I was growing more and more like Franklin every minute... or perhaps I'd been that way for quite awhile.

"Do you think that Stringy Pete will live up to his end of the bargain?" Vollinger inquired as we walked.

Sebastian chuckled, "No way, of course he won't. All we've done is stopped him from being tortured, now he can continue tormenting the living without anything getting in the way of his enjoyment."

Virgil shook his head, "I think... yes, he's going to give us his ship. You've not been to the other side, Sebastian... it doesn't matter how badly haunted Pete is, he's still going to be in pain here. Compared to what awaits him when he finally dies... I'm sure he'll give us his ship."

"Do you really think so, Virgil?" Even I was getting into the

conversation. "Are you so sure a devil like him is going to have the same peaceful death that you did?"

He nodded, "Yes, he's already paid his dues and, through us, made up for the sins in his past... that's all that matters. If I had not confronted my past... I might very well have ended up like old Pete..."

"I... see," Virgil's words struck closely to my heart. *So that's how it works... it looks like I'll get what's coming to me in the end, anyway... and I deserve it, too, for what I did to Frederick and Nathaniel.*

He could see the sadness in my eyes, "I... I didn't mean... that's not..."

"It's all right, Virgil." I tried to calm him. "Nothing will happen to me that I don't deserve."

His voice was firm and resolute. "I won't stand for that, Samantha. When all of this is over, I'll do whatever it takes to make things right. Together, we'll travel to the far ends of Arcanum if we have to...." *I wish there was a way, Virgil... oh, how I wish there was a way. ...but thank you... thank you for believing in me, and standing by me.*

At last we arrived at Stringy Pete's cove and we used that same little rowboat to make our way to his tiny little island.

"Ahoy, lassie! Did ye succeed in finishing yer tasks?"

"Yes," I nodded towards him, hand nervously twitching about my axe handle, "I've done what needed to be done..."

His eyes lit up and I grabbed ahold of my axe nervously, not quite yanking it from off my belt just yet. "That be amazin' lassie! I never thought you'd be able to do it... I never thought that someday I'd be free of this bloody curse! Thank ye, from the bottom a' me pirate heart..."

Can he really mean that...? Is he really going to let me go? "It was nothing, Pete. Now about that boat..."

He nodded, the fire in his eyes dimming. "Yes... of course, lassie! She's all yours! Feel free to take her wherever you want... I'll not be needin' her where I be a'goin'..."

His sentiment seemed genuine and I unconsciously loosened the grip on my axe. "Thank you, Pete... and good luck to you..."

Pete started fading away, becoming more and more translucent as he spoke.

"And to you, lassie... and to you..."

Virgil walked forward and put a hand on my shoulder gently. *All right, Virgil... you were right... and maybe, just maybe, you're right about me, too... I hope we can find a way...* Franklin's voice cut through the air like a knife. "Well, I say, that's something of a disappointment. I was rather looking forward to having a go with that bony bastard! Ha! No matter, we've got ourselves a ship! Let's get going to Thanatos! Say, can any of you sail?"

Vollinger stepped forward, walking up onto the boat. "I have not in quite some time, but I should be able to, yes. Just follow my orders and we'll have this ship on the shores of Thanatos in no time."

"Jolly good!" Franklin shouted enthusiastically. We all walked aboard the ship, and as long as we were on that ship we followed Vollinger's every command. Working together, we turned the ship around and were, indeed, headed straight for Thanatos. *I suppose it's about bloody time... and further, Vollinger continues to impress.*

We landed on the shores quite smoothly, actually, and I was pleased with Vollinger's ability. It wasn't him alone, of course, but he knew exactly what needed to be done and as long as we all followed along it was smooth sailing. We left the ship on the shore, tied down tightly. Sebastian left a few 'surprises' for anybody that might try to untie it without knowing about them, but I didn't expect to find any people on that godforsaken island.

We traveled around the northern peaks of the island, winding our way around towards the southern tip. The journey took about a week and a half, during which we fought just about every beast one could imagine. Compared to the legendary horrors I'd faced like the Stillwater Giant and the Lethe Wyvern they were awfully mundane, but I liked mundane even if Franklin didn't. He was happy enough fighting off the apes that stood thrice his height and the cougars that

could bite clear through the elven chain he wore. *Every man has his hobbies, I guess.*

At last we came to a rather strange looking land bridge. I could see the shores of a distant peninsula just barely through the thick tree growth. It seemed to lead further south, however, and I needed to go as far south as possible if the Archaeon were to be believed. *I really am ready to believe anything, aren't I? I never thought I'd run out of skepticism... no, I'm sure I've still got some left somewhere.*

We proceeded into the thick vegetation, and I lead the way with my axe, chopping violently through the thicker portions of the foliage. The trees around us formed almost a maze-like network of walls, making it even more difficult to navigate than even the most winding of caverns. I'd never seen trees grow any more thickly, although the ones in the Glimmering Forest came close. *Is this what the area around Tarant was like before Bates sold the dwarven steam engine?*

The local beasts were, needless to say, not happy to see us. Franklin, by contrast, was utterly delighted to see them. It was a strange situation to be sure. I didn't want to remove any more wildlife from the forest than I had to, but it was Thanatos and I suspected I was hardly having an impact on the overall ecology of that damned island. Even if I were, I'd never know it since scientists weren't able to make it off of the damned island alive anyhow. Who could say what kind of ecology the island had, aside from 'deadly'?

As we traveled farther and farther to the south the creatures grew bigger and more deadly. Although I would've liked to let Franklin get his fill of the 'beasties', as he called them, I wasn't willing to risk anybody's lives over it. The creatures were dangerous enough that each of us had to give it our all to survive. Thankfully, it seemed as though Franklin didn't really mind all that much. He seemed to enjoy watching me fight almost as much as he enjoyed doing the fighting himself. I just hoped I wouldn't have to repair 'Old Mary' again. That blasted thing broke more than it fired.

There were yet more surprises in store for the lot of us as we continued on. I could scarcely believe my eyes when I saw it, but there were apes attacking us that could actually use rudimentary

magicks! They weren't skilled enough to actually affect any of us with their crude attempts, but it was an impressive sight indeed.

We slaughtered our way through even more massive cougars, forest apes, and other giant monkeys on our progression towards the south. The forest was significantly longer than it had looked to be from the outside and after several hours of near constant fighting I was ready to be done with the damned place. My arms ached terribly and I wasn't normally one to feel sore after a good amount of fighting. Truly, the Island of Thanatos was a dreadful and dangerous place.

Suddenly, I heard a horrible wailing.

A massive ape leapt at me, landing a solid blow against my chest. I stumbled backwards, coughing from the pain. It howled and another massive ape came leaping forth, ready to attack me. Along with it I could hear the thundering of dozens of tiny feet, and a mass of utterly tiny apes emerged from behind the trees. They almost would have been cute if they weren't so obviously intent on killing me.

I leapt back to my feet, striking down the ape in front of me with a single blow. I tried to fall back, to rely on help from my companions, but it seemed that the thick foliage had put quite an uncomfortable distance between us. The other massive ape was on me, as was one of the tiny ones. The tiny bastard bit at my ankle, distracting me long enough for its larger cousin to thump me quite painfully on the head. I growled under my breath. *That's bloody it, I'm through with the lot of you!*

Even more of the tiny bastards began to swarm around me like vermin. I swatted at a few of them ineffectually before turning my sights to the larger, more threatening ape. Like the other ape before it I struck it down in a single blow, the smell of burnt fur assailing my nostrils as the best fell. The swarm of smaller apes went mad with rage, clawing and punching and biting at me. I stomped on one's hand, lowering my axe into its skull rather unceremoniously while it was pinned down. The others balked for just a moment, and that one moment was long enough for me to take out a third. Several more apes died before they had the chance to finally start running away. Just as the last of them was about to disappear behind the trees my

companions managed to find me. Sebastian seemed rather impressed by the pile of corpses laying at my feet.

"Thank you... how good of you to notice." My voice sounded far angrier than I actually felt. I was just starting to calm down from the combat, and the tiny cuts and bruises all about my legs were rather bothersome.

Sebastian seemed at least a little hurt, "Hey, I meant it... you don't have to get mad about it."

I sighed, "No, that's not it... I'm not mad at you, I'm just rather pissed off at this whole bloody island. If I never see another bloody monkey for the rest of my life it'll be too soon. Damn, those bastards really hurt when they bite into your leg!"

Virgil stammered, "I... I'm sorry, I should've stayed closer, I should've protected you..."

"Oh shut it," I smiled at him reassuringly, "I ran off on my own, it's my own damned fault. Besides... I need a friend more than a protector..."

He sighed. "All right... I know... I just want to do what I can. I want to protect you because I'm your friend..."

"By the Gods!" Franklin shouted. We all looked off in the direction of his call to see where he'd wandered off to. "What in the bloody hell is THAT doing here?!" After sharing a brief glance with each other we all ran in Franklin's direction to see just what it was he'd found.

It seemed almost ironic that at the one moment I got completely and utterly fed up with that damned island we would emerge from that horrible forest into the southernmost clearing. Franklin was parading about the clearing curiously, poking at things he probably ought not to have been allowed to touch.

The waters were crystal clear so far south of the mainland, and they ringed around the southernmost tip of the peninsula quite beautifully. I was too distracted to really pay them overly much

attention, however. I was certain that what had aroused Franklin's curiosity was the very same reason I had come to the island in the first place.

Well... if I can somehow manage to get my answers, I suppose it will all have been worth it.

Chapter the Sixty Second: A Most Shocking Discovery

It seemed like Franklin had found a run-down old shack, which he wandered around excitedly, rapping at the walls and peeking in through cracks. I felt an immense amount of magickal energy emanating from within it and I feared for what exactly that meant.

Franklin wandered around to a side of the shack with a window and peered in more clearly. "I say! There's an old chap here in this shack, and he's staring out at me with quite the expression on his face! Hello, there, old chap! I'm the famous adventurer, FRANKLIN PAYNE! Who might you be? Oh, blast! Where are my manners? Here I am, just staring into the privacy of your home through your little window there, how dreadfully rude of me. I'll come around to the door!"

I cleared my throat as I caught up to Franklin. "Er, Franklin...? Can I have a word with you?" *On second thought... perhaps it's for the best you don't realize what you've just done.*

"Why, certainly! What's on your mind?" Franklin was always so damned accommodating, though this was one situation where his eccentricity and enthusiasm made him appear a tad daft.

"I think... perhaps you'd best let me do the talking here. Uh... no offense..." I wasn't quite sure how I'd convince him at first, but suddenly I had a spectacular idea, "You see, I am a mediator - a somewhat famous one, actually - and I'd like to put my skills to good use! It's no different than your desire for combat with the nastiest beasties that ever existed, and it is SO difficult for me to find a good challenge these days. I'd bet drawing this chap out and finding out why he's here would be a rather appropriate challenge, don't you think?"

He nodded his head enthusiastically, "Why, that's fantastic! I suppose I had heard about the famous Tarantian mediator, Samantha Colburn, but I never made the connection! That's awful short-sighted of me, isn't it? I'd be happy to let you do the talking!" *Well, that's one concern taken care of.* I knocked gently on the door to the shack, then waited several moments and knocked even harder. Still, there was no answer, so finally I just opened the door up. *I'm not leaving.* The old, elven man staring out the window turned and scowled at me as I entered.

You see an old elf in a worn, tattered robe. He seems a bit annoyed at my presence.

"What do you want of me? I did not choose to live on this island for its ambiance."

He waves me off.

"I chose it so I wouldn't have to entertain fools. Leave me be."

I'm still not leaving! All right... all right, I just have to calm down. I can't be jumping to any hasty conclusions, here... boy, wouldn't that ever make me look the fool? "And who might you be?" I tried my best to sound pleasant and cheery.

His scowl did not let up for even an instant, no matter the pleasantness in my tone. *Hmph. Famous mediator indeed.* "I am no one of any importance, just an old soul who wishes to be left alone. As I have already asked of you, I might point out." It was true that I ought to have acceded to his request if I wanted to make a show of good faith, but I saw leaving as an even greater diplomatic faux pas.

Very well, if you must be like that, I'll get right to the point... however misguided it may very well be. "If you could point me towards Nasrudin's grave, then."

The man's scowl did not lift even for a second. If anything, it grew ever worse. "Ahhh, searching for the 'Great Nasrudin'. Hah! The 'Great Nasrudin'. What was so great about him? Damned fool, if you ask me." I sighed, rubbing my temples. *Why do you have to be so damned difficult?* Virgil nearly exploded with anger.

"What! How dare you, old man! Do you have any idea who you're talking about? Nasrudin was the wisest and most benevolent elf in

the history of Arcanum! He saved us all, and that includes YOU, so I recommend you keep your comments to yourself..."

I'm so not getting into the middle of this; it's not even funny. I wouldn't even be in the same damned room if I could help it. The old man actually seemed in better spirits, but not because of anything Virgil had said. If anything it seemed he rather enjoyed taunting poor Virgil. "Oh? And you think you know about Nasrudin, young man? Who are you to tell ME about that old, worthless elf?"

Virgil was livid. I'd not seen him get quite that excited ever since he'd been resurrected. "Worthless... why I ought to... no, I'm not going to sink to your level, old man. Nasrudin would have had more patience with men of your kind, and so will I. I don't have to defend him." *I am still not getting in the middle of this. I'm not even here... you two can just... ignore me. Please, carry on.*

The old man was almost laughing now, and I knew for certain he delighted in teasing Virgil. "Oh, of course you don't have to defend him, young man! The old elf was completely incorrigible! There's no defense whatsoever for individuals of such low character as he. You've chosen well not to waste your words on the likes of Nasrudin." *Ugh, could you make it any more obvious?*

Virgil, of course, took the bait.

"You're testing my patience, old man. Another bad word about Nasrudin, and it might just be the last one you say on both feet. Do we understand one another?"

I suppose he could stand to make it a bit more obvious... Gods, Virgil, shut up...! The old man was significantly more pensive, now. "You... remind me of someone I once met, many years ago. I can't remember the young man's name, but he was part of some religion... the Panarii, I think it was called. Are you also of the Panarii, young man...?"

The skin on Virgil's face started paling slightly and he began stuttering his words nervously, growing more and more unsure as he spoke. "Y-yes... I am of the P-panarii. I am Virgil, a new acolyte, but strong in my beliefs. W-ho are you...?" *Oh, Virgil, do you really have to*

ask?

The man smirked and gazed at Virgil fiercely, powerfully, "You call yourself one of the Defenders, and you don't know who I am...?"

Virgil's face flushed fully red and he fell to his knees, bowing all the way to the ground, "Oh, my... master, please, forgive me... I didn't know... I mean, I thought you had been reborn. Greetings, great Nasrudin."

I took the opportunity, at last, to cut into their conversation. "Hello, Nasrudin. I've been looking for you for a long time."

He turned and stared out the window disinterestedly, "I would say 'in all my glory', but I'm afraid I haven't any left."

"Come now," I scolded, "You saved the world from Arronax. Surely there's glory to be had, no matter how far in the distant past." Suddenly, his mood shifts to one of quiet sadness. He shakes his head slowly.

"No, I delivered the world to Arronax. I put in place the system that he felt was his for the taking, I even imparted my elven arrogance to him. I must bear full responsibility for his actions."

The man's self-pity could move mountains. "A bit dramatic, don't you think? Arronax's actions were his own."

He shook his head sadly, staring at me with genuine regret in his cold, distant eyes. "You do not understand... he was my son. I taught him. Everything. Only to see him be carried away by his youthful temper. I should have seen it. There must have been a way to stop him before it came to... what it did."

Arronax is your son?! Well, that's not something they mention in the scriptures. Just when I think nothing can surprise me anymore, you have to go and prove me wrong. What next, is Terry the reincarnation of your brother? I calmed myself quickly and easily. Truly, I really was getting used to surprises. "I've heard all of the legends, but you know how reliable those must be. Can you tell me what really happened?" "It started in the Age of Legends. I was young, headstrong. I thought I could take on the world, and I did. I fought the good fight, to protect

the "lesser races," as I arrogantly called them, from the chaos that raged everywhere. Dragons, demons, evil sorcerers, I fought them all and won. And this was all before even the days of the Elven Council."

Hm... well, if there's anybody I can ask about this it's you. "How did the Elven Council come about?" Now that I'd gotten past Nasrudin's initial reaction, I was quite awed that I was actually speaking with such a historic figure. Frederick, why... why can I not come home to you and share the stories of my travels? Why can you not be here with me, bearing witness to such an amazing conversation...?

Nasrudin answered my question, thankfully startling me out of my momentary weakness. "I gathered a group of idealistic mages together, and we created an Elven Council. 'For the good of all.' We really believed that. For a time, I suppose it was even true. I really believe things began to change when we discovered a way to banish things from this plane of existence.

...It was the ultimate weapon. Once something was banished from this plane of existence, it could never return. With ultimate power comes ultimate responsibility, and ultimate corruption. We were quick to use it on new and ever more terrible threats. The Bane of Kree. Kraka-Tur. Gorgoth. Kerghan."

I urged him further, wanting to hear as much of the story as he was willing to share. Although I missed Frederick dearly, my habits were not solely based on sharing stories with him. I was most assuredly curious in my own right. "So how did Arronax fit into all this?" "Sometime during all this heroic carnage, my son came of age. I quickly ushered him into the Council, amidst some of the others' protests about his young age and inexperience. And then it all came crashing down upon me."

He pauses.

"Look, are you certain you really want to hear all of this self-pitying drivel?"

If I didn't I would've left long ago. "Of course. So what did Arronax actually do that was so terrible?" I'd heard the stories, of course... I'd been interested in them ever since I found out I was 'supposed' to fight him. There were none more qualified to fill in the details,

however, than Nasrudin... with the possible exception of Arronax himself, but he didn't seem likely to be up for a friendly chat.

Nasrudin sighed heavily, obviously and sincerely upset. He gave me a long look before beginning his story, looking straight into my eyes. I know not what he saw there, but whatever it was he decided to share his tale with me... and it was a tale every bit as amazing as my own, and probably moreso. I listened quietly to his words, for as long as he cared to continue sharing them.

He had taken it upon himself to "keep the balance", as he termed it. He believed that being a member of the Council validated any course of action he chose to pursue. This meant attacking anything he saw as a threat, such as a city that had begun building advanced technological devices. Vendigroth, it was called.

He warned them to cease their "destructive behavior" and destroyed one of their factories to underscore his point. Justifiably afraid for their very lives, they swiftly constructed a device that could destroy even the most powerful wizard. He responded by calling on forces that few of us had ever seen, and wiping not just the city, but the whole province of Vendigroth from the face of Arcanum with one blow.

He felt himself betrayed when the council condemned his actions. He showed no remorse. In his arrogance, he was sure he would be vindicated. I cast the deciding vote to banish my own son.

"If I must die, I will be the last!" he screamed as he hurled the spell that brought an end to the council, the Age of Legends, and my will to live.

It was a harsh dawn that morning on the plains of Brodgar... and it was there, in the shadow of the Black Spire, that our armies met in the most terrible battle that Arcanum has ever seen.

As the sun set, only four of us were still alive to witness the destruction we had brought to pass.

I found Arronax among the corpses of our decimated armies...

...and it was there that I condemned my own son to the Void.

In the end, it was only through our combined might that Arronax was subdued, and I watched my own son fall into the horror of the Void. But such was the fury and power unleashed by this conflict that the very fabric of reality was torn asunder.

With our remaining energy, we were able to seal the rift with powerful wards... and the Ring of Brodgar still stands today as a monument to my son's destructive pride, and my own unforgivable failure.

When I regained consciousness, I was on the shore of Thanatos. I had regained just enough energy to seal myself in a regenerative shell. I remained that way for a thousand years. No one had ever stayed in a shell for anywhere near that amount of time. Somehow, my "magical hibernation" extended my life much beyond that of even the most powerful Elven mages.

He sighed heavily and turned back towards his window. It seemed like his story was over. Needless to say, I was amazed. I'd never dreamed of hearing such a tale from one who had lived through it... from Nasrudin himself! "...but why... why have you hidden yourself here for a thousand years?"

His answer came with a hard stare directly at me, "The world out there is not mine. It only serves to remind me of my failure. Everyone I knew, everything I held dear, is gone. I myself should have died long ago. Besides, I do not fancy being worshipped as a god."

I chuckled, despite how serious the situation was. "I know the feeling. The Panarii think I am your reincarnation." *Boy if that isn't an odd thing for me to say.*

Nasrudin looked me up and down, shaking his head, "I pity you, then. I received a taste of their hero worship from Mannox, and I can tell you I didn't like the taste of it one bit."

Ah, so you did have a chat with Mannox, then... it wasn't just a product

of his rather inventive imagination. I snorted, "An interesting point of view, all things considered..." Virgil didn't take particularly kindly to my attitude.

"Hold on there! Do you two realize exactly what you're talking about here? Perhaps this is an interesting philosophical debate for you two, but we're talking about the foundations of the Panarii religion here!"

I didn't mean... argh, you can be so thick-headed sometimes! "Virgil, I don't think now's the time..." I sighed, feeling a bit guilty at my anger. I supposed that I would be upset, too, if I were in Virgil's situation... and it wasn't terribly kind to brush it off so casually right in front of him.

He continued his rant despite my objections, and I supposed it wasn't really my place to stop him. "I mean... if you're not dead," he pointed to Nasrudin as he said it, then pointed at me, "that means you're not his reincarnation. Where the bloody hell does that leave the rest of us? Are any of the prophecies true? Have all of us Panarii just been running around half-cocked for the last 2000 years?"

Nasrudin sighed and looked at Virgil with genuine sympathy, "Easy, young Virgil. I know how all of this must make you feel, and I apologize for making light of your beliefs. Unfortunately, I don't have the answers you're seeking."

Virgil refused to calm down. He was still somehow strangely calm despite his anger, but he wasn't directing that anger towards anybody in particular... he was just frustrated. "I mean no disrespect, Nasrudin... but if YOU don't have any idea as to what's going on here, then you'll forgive me if I'm having a few doubts concerning the validity of my new found religion."

Nasrudin chuckles.

"Good, Virgil. If there is one thing in life that one must learn, it is to question everything. In the end, I'm sure you will have the answers that you seek. And whether or not this is all the fulfillment of a prophecy or just random chance, does it change the gravity of our situation? Would you do anything differently, if you knew one way or the other?"

Virgil smiled up at him, "No, I wouldn't. And I will see this until the end, regardless of the reasons behind it. Thank you, Nasrudin. At the

very least, your wisdom warrants a religious movement, even if its followers tend to be a bit soft in the head." Virgil seemed to be cheering up, which was quite a good thing. Despite the sheer depth of Nasrudin's self-pity, he was an all right old elf.

I looked up at him, determining that he and Virgil's little conversation had finally come to an end. "So, Nasrudin... I suppose that means you know of the Panarii, then?"

His expression changed somewhat rapidly from one of mirth to one of dread, and I couldn't really say I blamed him. "I am well aware of the whole Panarii tomfoolery, yes. When I emerged from my regenerative state, I traveled to the mainland. I suppose I thought I could somehow live among the world again... after I spoke with that Mannox fellow, I knew I was deluding myself."

As long as I was sitting through a history lesson, I figured I might as well hear all sides of it. "Did he tell you how the Panarii began?" I had been rather curious about that fact.

"He did not know much, mostly some fanciful notions mixed with bits and pieces of history. As near as I was able to put together from speaking with him, K'ryon Urden, the last surviving member of the Council, started the Panarii simply to maintain the wards. To periodically strengthen them, as it were."

So it wasn't even a religion at all... well, that makes sense. "Did you tell Mannox who you were?" It was a stupid question, but for whatever reason I asked it anyway. Even I still sometimes succumbed to just blurting out whatever was on my mind, flustered in the presence of a living legend.

Thankfully, he didn't seem to mind the inanity of the conversation too much. At the very least I was growing on him. "After I listened to his insane beliefs for what seemed like hours, I hinted that I had actually known Nasrudin. He was already too far gone. He would not have believed any of my protests or denials of my godhood. He most likely would have interpreted the whole thing as some sort of test, I suppose."

I smirked at that and almost laughed. *How right you are, Nasrudin... I*

felt guilty, again. Manno's tale certainly wasn't one to laugh at. "Are you aware that K'an Hua murdered Manno?"

He merely nodded, trying to brush it off as though it wasn't a big deal. "When Manno disappeared, I knew that something of that nature must have transpired."

What? How can you be so unaffected by it? The man died because of his love for you... "And you did nothing about it?" Even as I asked the question, I realized I very likely would've done the same thing if I were him. Where did it end? If he avenged Manno, would he then watch over the thousands of other worshippers protectively?

"I decided it was no longer my place to play a god. Who am I to decide who is right? When I took on that role before... well, you have already heard what happened then."

I really didn't like where the conversation was going. I understood his reasoning, but I couldn't help feeling pity for Manno. He didn't deserve his fate. *If all goes well, he will be avenged now... it might be over a thousand years too late, but at least I can take comfort in that.* "I am sorry to be the bearer of bad news, Nasrudin, but you're going to need to do something now. Arronax, with the help of his own worshippers - a group of elves that call themselves the Dark Elves - has had an entire clan of dwarves banished to the Void with him. He forces them to work tirelessly on building a machine to weaken the wards so that he can return. He has already appeared to me once, threatening the destruction of all..."

Nasrudin sighed, then, and it was almost as if I could see the weight of my words piercing his spirit. I hadn't wanted to say them any more than he'd wanted to hear them, but it was unfortunately necessary. "I feel as if I have been waiting to hear those words since I awoke, those many years ago. I had hoped it would never come to this." He cried out, his voice filling the small shack with his anguished tone, "Why, Arronax?! Why can't you see the folly of the path you've chosen?!" Calming, he stared at me with a level gaze, "What are you going to do about this situation?"

ME? I came here because I was told to... you're supposed to have the answers. "What am I going to do? He's your son. What are you going to do?" It felt somewhat rude to say such a thing to Nasrudin, but at

least I wasn't worshipping him.

"I fear there is nothing I can do. I am old, tired. I do not believe I could stand up against my son now, even if I could find the heart to try."

I could've understood if his reasons were emotional, which in part they were, but if it were a question of power... "How is it that he is still so powerful after all this time?" *You're Nasrudin! Do you really think I stand any kind of a chance if you don't?*

It seemed that he felt guilty once again, although that was hardly an uncommon emotion for the old chap. "We do not know what life in the Void is like, if it can even be called life. Who knows what sources of power could be found on the other side?"

If it's all the same to you, I'd rather not take this lying down. "There must be some way to stop him." I hadn't traveled across the entire Island of Thanatos just to be told 'tough luck'.

Nasrudin considered my words quite seriously, gazing into my eyes to see just how strong my resolve was. It seemed as though I passed his scrutiny, "I can think of only one possible strategy to defeat him, now. You must retrieve the Vendigroth device that was meant to destroy him."

What? Don't tell me you've gone senile in your old age. You're Nasrudin! Nasrudin can't be senile! "The Vendigroth device? You said Vendigroth was destroyed."

"And so it was, above ground. There are many catacombs and tunnels lying beneath the surface. Some of the members attempted to retrieve it to use against Arronax, but they never returned. We were forced to battle him without it, and you know the consequences of that."

At the very least my technological inclination seemed like it would be a boon when it came to retrieving the damned thing. I didn't have to worry about my arsenal fizzling out right in front of me. "What does the device do?" *I can't believe I'm thinking of doing this.*

He had some difficulty trying to explain it, but eventually the words came to him. I supposed I would've had the same difficulty in describing to him the technological principles that made my axe work. "Extremely powerful mages have the ability to regenerate

themselves whenever they are badly hurt, as I did. If one is powerful enough to hurt a master sorcerer gravely, the mage will retreat into his regenerative shell, and emerge stronger than ever. The device is the only way known to disrupt the regenerating shield."

It sounded like the ultimate confrontation of science versus magick, and truthfully even I was leery of it. I didn't like it any better than I would have liked a magickal amulet that would turn a restorative potion into a poison. It seemed horrible, vile, and quite unfortunately exactly what I needed. "And disrupting the field kills the mage within?"

"Quite so. The technology of the device is designed to disrupt the field in such a way as to cause the shell to drain the life force, instead of regenerating it. Quite gruesome to contemplate, actually. Further, it is said that one who is killed in this manner is forever separated from this world, with no chance of being returned magically or otherwise."

The more I learned about it, the more I thought that my initial opinion was wrong. It was far more horrible than some twisted magickal amulet... it was a technological method for banishment. It seemed quite a bit more final, however. *Hmph... more final than banishment to the void? The ultimate technological weapon... yes, perhaps this is up to me after all... perhaps, with such a device, I might be able to succeed where Nasrudin failed. Well, if that isn't bloody arrogant I don't know what is.* "How can I find this device?" *I still can't believe I'm really considering doing this.*

His voice was stern and unforgiving, which it had to be to properly get the point across. "You must search the ruins of Vendigroth, in the wastes where the city once lay." I really didn't like the way he was staring at me. He wasn't just answering my questions, he was telling me what he expected me to do. Even after a thousand years of isolation he still had a rather commanding presence.

If you want me to run this damned errand for you, then you'd better give me what you can. "Where can I find the ruins? The wastes are vast, as you know."

Of all things, he actually shrugged. "I do not know, exactly. Those days are long past, and with them a better part of my memory, I am

afraid." I growled silently and held out my map suggestively. He stared at it for several moments, contemplative, "All I know is that at one point Vendigroth and its settlements spread out over that whole area now known as the Wastes. There was a bridge leading into the Vendigroth province, here." He pointed to a particular spot on my map, in a northwesterly direction from Ashbury.

Well that's just bloody great. I really didn't relish the idea of wandering around that godforsaken wasteland aimlessly until stubbing my toe on just the right piece of junk. "Why don't you retrieve the device?" If I were going to be the one to fight Arronax, Nasrudin could at least meet me halfway....

"I must conserve what little remains of my energy to banish you to the Void, once you have retrieved the device. The banishment spell is rarely performed by a single mage, its power requirement is great."

Stop... full stop. I never agreed to this. You can't be bloody serious. "Hold a moment - you are going to banish me?" *I know I've not lived a saintly life, but really I think banishment is a bit extreme...*

The look on his face suggested he was not joking in the slightest. "Certainly. If we were to wait for Arronax to breach the wards, I fear the loss of life would be immeasurable."

I was torn between feeling guilty and outraged. Truly, I had been planning to just wait... but Nasrudin was right. I sighed. "It seems everything has fallen to me, once again." *I suppose this makes the most sense... who am I? I'm nobody... I've got nothing left. Besides, if anybody can get banished to the Void and succeed, it's going to be me. This makes the most sense for everybody...* I was trying desperately to convince myself of what truly needed to be done.

"The irony of all this is not lost on myself. One might almost believe the prophecies to be true. It does appear that you are instrumental in halting this cataclysm. If only this were not necessary. I had hoped that... I had hoped if Arronax ever returned he would have realized the error of what he'd done."

I shook my head sadly, "Judging from my encounter with him, I'd say he had not." I was less saying it to Nasrudin and more to myself, still trying to force a realization that I had no other choice. That realization would take far more time than I was giving it, however. It

was not every day one was confronted with banishment to the Void for the good of all.

Nasrudin responded, somewhat annoyed that I continued reminding him of his son's folly. "Yes, yes. It is obvious to me that he has committed himself to a path which can only end in his destruction."

Instead of standing there, shocked, I tried focusing on what I had left to do. It wasn't like I was going to be banished the very next day... I had plenty of time to come to terms with it. "What do I do once I've retrieved the device?"

"You must meet me at the site of the wards, the Ring of Brodgar, as they are now known. The barrier between the worlds is thin enough there for me to be able to send you across by myself. I would suggest you bring as much help as you can recruit, as it will be no easy task to defeat Arronax."

Help? You want me to damn even more individuals than myself? Even as I thought of it, I knew he was right in some respects. I couldn't afford to fail. I didn't want to take Virgil with me, but I knew he, at least, would insist. So would Franklin, actually... he wouldn't miss the grandest adventure in the world even if it would cost him his life... perhaps especially because it would cost him his life. Vollinger owed me at least that much... not just me, he owed it to the world. The Hand had been helping Arronax to return, it only made sense that one of them would help to reverse that. That only left Sebastian and Terry, and I'd have to ask Sebastian how he felt about the whole thing. *I suppose that settles it, though. At least I'll have company.* "I'll do it, but can you clarify some things for me before I am off?"

He nodded patiently, understanding the severity of what I was going to undergo. "What is it that is troubling you?"

"Well," I began slowly, unsure of how to approach the subject. "If Arronax is still around, then no doubt some of the others you banished might still be there as well. I might very well come face to face with more than one of them. I'd like to know anything you could tell me so I can best prepare myself."

Although he seemed almost bored in his recollection of them, he

grudgingly accepted. "Whose tale of woe would you like to have recounted?"

"Why don't we start with Gorgoth?" *I know almost nothing of him. I wouldn't have the slightest idea what to expect if I came across such a legendary beast...*

"Gorgoth's is a simple tale, though disturbingly common in the Age of Legend. He was a mindless beast with an insatiable appetite. Had a liking for halflings, if I recall correctly. Bringing him low took quite a fierce battle, though a mindless one. We could think of nothing to do with him, so we banished him to the Void to keep him from wreaking any more havoc."

That seemed awful trivial. *Couldn't they have just killed him instead of banishing him? I suppose it was the 'in' thing in those days.* "I see. Then what about Kerghan? I know a bit about him, but he's something of a frightening character... the more information I have on him the better I'll feel."

Nasrudin nodded painfully, willing to tell me any stories I asked even though he obviously preferred to remember none of it, "Kerghan was a member of the Council, the only human one, in fact. He was a dabbler, he was, always experimenting and searching for new magicks. His discovery of the Necromantic Arts was the beginning of the end for him. The council took a dim view of magicks that had the ability to manipulate the very life force of a being, and we bade him to stop any further inquiries in that area."

"...and he did not." It wasn't a question. I would never forget the contents of the journal I'd read.

The tone in Nasrudin's voice was a dark and regretful one. "He totally disregarded our warnings and continued his ghastly experiments. Arronax was assigned to investigate, and turned up the rather disturbing details. Kerghan had been stealing corpses and experimenting with their life forces. What was infinitely more disturbing to me, though, was the vehemence of Arronax's drive to have Kerghan banished rather than simply exiled."

So even then, Arronax was already beginning his descent into darkness...
"Why did Arronax's attitude trouble you?"

"Our mission was to impartially judge, to rule for the common good, regardless of our personal feelings. Arronax did not even attempt to hide his hatred of Kerghan. Worse, I always suspected that Arronax's hate was based more on the fact that Kerghan was a human on the Elven Council than on the facts of the case."

I could see why that would be troubling, although at least his head had been in the right place even if his heart hadn't. Arcanum would never forget the scars left by the Derian-Ka and their war with the Molochean Hand... and it would've been so much worse had Kerghan not been banished. "Did you not think Kerghan's crimes warranted his banishment?"

He shook his head, quite sure of himself in at least this one thing, "No, I believe our decision was the correct one. It is just that there is a proper way to conduct oneself, and Arronax was neither unbiased nor objective. I began to have serious misgivings about his membership on the council after that. The whole Vendigroth situation exploded shortly afterwards, before I could come to a decision about Arronax's role on the Council."

The sadness in Nasrudin's eyes made me feel guilty for pressing him so much on things so closely related to his son. I could tell it tore him up inside, even after all of these years. It was best to just change the subject outright. "What can you tell me about the Bane of Kree?"

Thankfully, that seemed to be a significantly more positive subject to discuss, at least for him. "The Bane of Kree. Bringing him to justice was what established my reputation as a warrior. That reputation eventually led to the legends surrounding me, which I had no control over. The Bane was a nomad warrior who was able to gather together nearly all the ancient nomadic tribes and create a vicious army out of them. I became involved when he slaughtered the army of Kree."

I followed along interestedly, "What happened then?"

"His legendary courage failed him. When faced with certain defeat, he lost his mind and fled back to Kree. He had his army slaughter every man, woman, and child in his desperation. I do not know what he hoped to accomplish by this. When I caught up with him, I was overcome by a bit of the madman myself. I banished him single-handedly in my fury, which was not an easy thing to do, even then."

I can see why that would give rise to a few legends, yes. "Then what about Kraka-Tur?" I already knew much of that story, but hearing it from Nasrudin's point of view instead of by reading Kraka-Tur's journal was bound to be interesting... especially considering the kind of creature Kraka-Tur really was.

Nasrudin almost laughed. "Kraka-Tur was a conniving coward who found a way to turn himself into a twisted monster, half-man and half-dragon. In this form he terrorized cities and villages, killing their inhabitants and burning them to the ground. After a colossal battle and his defeat at the hands of the council, he cried and begged us not to banish him. Pathetic."

Yes, I think 'pathetic' describes him quite nicely. "I thank you for sharing your tales with me, Nasrudin. I will go to Vendigroth and retrieve the device, then when I am ready meet you at the Ring of Brodgar. Wish me luck."

He arched an eyebrow at me as I left his small shack. "Luck? You'll need a lot more than luck." *How right you are, old man...*

Chapter the Sixty Third:

Journey To The Wastes

Thanatos was no easier to leave than it was to get to in the first place, but at the very least I was growing accustomed to the horrible beasts that stood in my way every time I turned another corner. "How do the rest of you feel about going to the wastes of Vendigroth?" I didn't pause for a moment to ask my question, instead continuing northward and hacking apart a vile mutant spider creature on my way.

"I must confess," Franklin began, "I am a bit disappointed that we'll be leaving Thanatos so soon. On the other hand, I'm most excited to follow you along to Vendigroth! ...and then the Void! You'll surely be needing the help of the great FRANKLIN PAYNE when going to such a godawful, horrible place as that! I can't wait!"

I had a feeling you'd say that. Virgil seemed considerably less sure of himself. "Well, I'm certainly not going to abandon you now. I won't lie, I'm not comfortable with either destination, but I'll stick by you no matter where it leads. That's what friends do."

I smiled at him, "Thanks, Virgil... even in the depths of the Void, it will bring me comfort to have you with me... you've been with me since the start of this whole thing. In that brief moment that you left... I felt so empty. Ah, no offense to the great Franklin Payne, of course... having a man of his talents is along bound to benefit all of us."

Franklin started laughing outright, "That's the spirit! Ghastly horrors the likes of which Arcanum has never seen, legendary monsters and criminals banished for the good of all... I wouldn't miss it for the world! Why, I'd bet I can even teach those dwarves a thing or two. With my help they'll have their machine built to help us return in no

time flat!"

Of course! I'd almost bloody forgotten about that! When we stop Arronax, surely the dwarves will help us to get home... why, I'm like Stennar... I could probably make it back easily! Sebastian seemed to pick up on that same fact, "It's just like every other place I follow you to, right? Only more dark and more horrible? Well, every new place you drag me off to is more dark and horrible, so I don't see how this is any different... just gotta wait for a bunch of dwarves to build us the way back. I'm alright with that." Terry barked in acceptance and Sebastian looked at me with his eyebrow raised, "Say, why do you have to hog all the jerky any way? Little fella gets hungry more than you know."

I chuckled and tossed the bag of jerky over in Sebastian's direction. I knew he'd spoil Terry fiercely, but if any dog could use a soft spot it was that one. I glanced at Vollinger as we approached Stringy Pete's old boat, curious if he'd really go so far as to follow me into the Void after all. "Well, Vollinger? What'll it be? Is the Hand willing to spare a talented assassin like you to right its wrongs in helping Arronax return?"



Vollinger shot me a rather displeased glance. "If you don't mind my saying so, I would politely ask that you stuff a sock in it." I couldn't help but laugh at how strange it sounded for him to say such a thing. "Yes, I will be accompanying you to the Void with or without your permission, and it has little to do with Arronax. I wish to destroy him as much as any of you, but moreso I wish to accompany you, Samantha, as your friend. I hope you have not forgotten that."

I paused, thinking about it and feeling somewhat bad for how I'd been treating him. Franklin filled the silence with more of his enthusiasm, "By cracky, of course! I was so bloody distracted about

all of the suspense, the mystery, the horrible creatures... I nearly forgot about Arronax himself! I'll be a monkey's uncle if that won't be the battle of all battles! Magnificent!"

Well, at least we're all settled about it then... I'm rather glad I won't have to endure this alone. "I apologize for my attitude, Vollinger. If you would, please take us to Caladon... I realize it's taking the long way, but I'd like to be as prepared as possible before we hit Vendigroth and I've got one last pair of altars to hit."

"As you wish," the wheel of the ship turned easily in his hands and he guided us smoothly away from Thanatos, back towards the mainland. I tried to relax, although my anxiety was rather firm. I'd handled Thanatos as gracefully as could be expected, so it was silly to think Vendigroth would be any worse.

We reached Caladon easily, but I no longer felt comfortable within the city walls. I desperately wanted to stay the night, but something about it just didn't feel right. *Frederick is no longer here... this isn't my home anymore....* Although my companions grumbled a bit at my insistence, instead of staying we proceeded northward immediately and camped out as usual. After only a few short days of journeying we reached my first goal: Bolo's Altar.

I prayed to the altar for a second time, following the offering of another pilfered ring. I was strongly accustomed to the feeling of receiving blessings, but each time I received another was still a pleasant experience. Bolo's blessing was especially welcome, although I thought bitterly that I hardly needed such a thing any longer. There were few thieves better than I, and I didn't feel overly arrogant in thinking as much.

Following my brief stop there I made for Gorgoth Pass, intending on visiting the altar of Kaitan before making my way over to Black Root to catch the train. Unlike Hardin's Pass the weather there was mild, even pleasant. I didn't know exactly what I had been expecting when I went there, but I was most displeased to find it infested with aggressive creatures of all kinds. They were a sight less intimidating than the ones on Thanatos, that was for sure, but I still wasn't fond of battling my way through the entire bloody mountain pass.

The oversized ape-like creatures that attacked me weren't entirely unlike the ones on Thanatos, but they didn't have a particularly magickal bent to them, and they also weren't nearly as strong. They went down easily underneath the might of my axe, and as long as they didn't swarm, like those bastards on Thanatos did, I would be fine.

Franklin scratched his head rather perplexed at our course of travel. "Excuse me, Samantha, but are we going the wrong way? I must say, the beasties here aren't all that terrifying in the slightest! What kind of an adventure is this?"

I sighed, "Easy, Franklin... we'll be through here soon enough, and well on our way to Vendigroth. You can't defy death every day... save some for the afterlife!"

He seemed to take that bit of advice. "Oh, very well. I suppose-Gods, what is that thing?! I call dibs!"

I found it more than a little strange that the very same kind of golem I'd once found in the Black Mountain Clan mines was just out wandering in the wilderness, but questioning it did little to get rid of it. I didn't relish the idea of fighting it, either... striking those bastards always made my arms hurt something terrible later on. I was all too happy to let Franklin have his wish. "Have at it, old boy. I'll trust you to take care of this threat!" He laughed heartily, firing Old Mary at it repeatedly, and the rest of us scampered off towards the east.

No sooner had I rounded the next shrub than I was set upon by a thick herd of tiny monkeys. It was those damned swarmers again, although they weren't nearly as numerous or vicious as they had been on Thanatos. I grumbled, pulling out my axe and swatting at the bastards clinging to the hem of my dress. "Off! Get the bloody hell off me!"

Vollinger's gun rang out and the first of the swarmers fell. I followed suit, striking down half a dozen more in mere moments. A rage overcame me like the time I had fought against the dozens of bat creatures in the Caladon sewers. I was a blur of motion, tiny little

monkeys falling dead wherever my blade passed by. When it was over, my companions applauded me - including Franklin, who had finished with his ore golem and rejoined the rest of us.

The narrow pass through the mountains continued eastward, and the six of us continued to follow it. Battle with the local fauna grew tiresome at best, and already I began to look forward to the nice, quiet train ride I had waiting ahead of me. *Going from Black Root to Ashbury is a good, long ride... plenty of time to just relax. From there, it's on to the wastes... ugh.* Perhaps I wasn't looking so much forward to the train ride after all.

My train of thought was broken by a rather exceptionally loud growling noise. I looked over towards it just in time to see a giant cat, almost fully my size, leaping off of a nearby rock, aimed straight at my head! I ducked beneath it, catching just a slight scratch along my brow, and it landed softly behind me. *Now here's a position I hate to be in.*

I turned just in time to see a pocket of blood explode outward from its side and watch it slowly slump over onto its side. "Haha!" Franklin shouted, "If you want to go after her, you'll have to get past FRANKLIN PAYNE!" It seemed awfully silly the way he went on about it, but I appreciated his protection. I didn't have overly much time to think it over, however, as I heard another growl coming from behind me.

I turned again, facing the second cat just as he leapt in front of me. I parried his claw with my axe and he growled and hissed at the searing pain that overcame him. *Don't worry, kitty... your suffering will be at an end quite fast.* I laid the bastard to the ground in a single strike, much to Franklin's approval.

Much to my dismay, the bastard mountain lions weren't the last threat I faced on my stubborn journey towards the forgotten altar. *The things I go through for a simple, bloody pilgrimage. Bloody indeed... no wonder there are so many Panarii. Not that I envy them for adhering to a false religion...* Coming out from a gravelly outcropping of charred rock, I next faced off against an elemental being made of pure fire.

Terry ran up to it, intent on saving me the pain, but he stopped short when he hit the wall of heat the creature emanated. He growled at it heavily, snarling most ferociously even as he slowly backed away. I didn't blame him, and actually rather preferred he keep back. If he got any nearer to the damned thing he'd go up in flames in an instant. I already knew from the blood stains in my dress that Virgil's skills with water magick were most unfortunately lacking.

I crept behind the bastard elemental and laid into it with my axe. The fiery properties of the blade did little against the creature, but what it lacked in damage it made up for with technical prowess. Not only was the blade itself finely crafted, for which I had poor old Liam to thank, but the creature I fought couldn't possibly exist in the same space as the axe. There was little else aside from magick holding a being of living flame together, and with each strike I further severed it from this plane of existence.

At last, when the skin on my hands and forearms was scarred and blackened, the creature finally fell beneath my assault. I stopped to catch my breath, Virgil glancing over at my wounds unappreciatively. "I'm sorry, but... I don't think I can do anything for you," he whined.

"Of course you can," I glanced at him rudely and tossed my purse at his feet. "Fetch me out a salve would you... digging around in there myself would hurt like hell right now." He smiled gently and pulled out no less than three salves for me, which I then applied. I remained quite astonished at just how effective the modern salves were. Not only did they clean my arms, wiping away the black, but they fully restored the newly broken and scarred flesh beneath. It was truly a miracle.

At last, I found the altar I'd been searching for. It was a largely unspectacular little thing, just sitting out in the open. It even had a substantial amount of damage done to it from the local beasts as well as the long-term effects of weather. I only hoped the damned thing would still work. I placed a small geode on the altar, directing my prayers towards Kaitan.

For the third time I received the blessing of a greater god, this time the god of balance. The sickly sweet blessing of Halcyon and the dark

and unsettling blessing of Moorindal were finally separated, bringing ease to my soul. There was no better way to explain it other than 'peaceful'. *Wherever you are, Velorien... I'm ready for you... I've received the blessings from each and every one of your children.* I got up from the altar and made my way east.

The trip to Black Root was nothing new, or difficult. When I wasn't being jumped by assassins every other day it was actually a rather peaceful journey. The wildlife, thankfully, was considerably less dense than it had been in the mountain pass. Upon our arrival in Black Root I immediately purchased a ticket for Ashbury. The train wasn't scheduled to leave for quite a while, so I passed the time by sipping a few shots of whiskey at the Sour Barnacle right alongside Captain Teach. Sebastian joined me, but the others chose instead to wait at the train station.

"...so, there we were, standing in front of the poor girl... Sebastian had this huge treasure chest in his arms and the most sheepish look on his face. She didn't know what to make of it! All she could think to say was 'I suppose old Stringy Pete ain't such a bad bugger after all.' Can you believe it? Stringy Pete! Not so bad! Ha!"

Teach laughed and laughed at the stories I shared, "Aye, that be a good one, lassie! If I don't miss me guess, though, and I often don't... ye're scheduled to be missin' that train o' yers right about now." I glanced out the window to see it had gotten significantly later than I'd planned on and just then heard the sound of the train departing.

"Son of a bitch! It's been a pleasure, cap'n!" I dashed out of the bar and ran for the train at full speed. Virgil was waiting for me on the last car, hanging off of the end and trying to grab my hand. I ran as fast as I possibly could, desperately concentrating on not tripping over my own feet after the amount of whiskey I'd had. Finally, Virgil grabbed ahold of my hand and hauled me up onto the train. Not a moment later he grabbed ahold of Sebastian as well and pulled him up.

"Whew... now that was sure a pain in the ass... remind me to NEVER do that again, eh?" Sebastian may not have been the most eloquent or polite, but he had a damned good point. I shuffled through the

Mages' Caboose uncomfortably, seeking out one of the more luxury cars where I could lie down for a spell. Sleeping off my drunkenness as we made our way to Ashbury seemed like a rather fantastic idea. The last thought I had as I drifted off to sleep was how I forgot to tell Captain Teach he could have my boat.



Virgil poked me awake when the train finally arrived. I'd slept like the dead the whole way there thanks to the whiskey, and I owed it a debt of gratitude. I quickly gathered up my things and departed the station, meeting back up with the others. It seemed as though they'd been waiting for me a short while already. "So sorry about that. Let's get headed north right away then, shall we?" And so we did.

Compared to reaching Black Root from Caladon by way of Gorgoth Pass, the trip to the Wastes was a pleasantly short one. Perhaps it was just that Franklin's excitement caused him to be more boisterous than ever, but at the very least he wasn't too deliberately annoying. Traveling with him was oftentimes like traveling with a child with the way he carried on so incessantly. Not to mention he couldn't sit still for a single bloody moment.

We could see the Wastes long before we actually reached them, the sandy dunes poking up above the horizon. It seemed a rather strange contrast to the grassy plains we still walked upon. At last we saw the bridge, a horribly rusted old thing, surprisingly sturdy considering the years of wear upon it. Sitting out in front of the old thing was a rather strange looking halfling fellow, just camped out like there wasn't a care in the world. I strolled up to him curiously, "Well, now... who might you be?"

"I am Weldo Rubin, the renowned halfling adventurer, at your service madam."

Renowned... halfling... adventurer...? Those three words do not mix. I gave Franklin a knowing glance and he winked back at me. I suppose if the little man wanted to think of himself as an adventurer, it wasn't any harm to me. "What are you doing out here, Weldo?"

He shrugged, almost offended. "Why, adventuring, of course! What better place to explore than the dreaded wastes of Vendigroth!" *Oh, I don't know... perhaps Thanatos, or maybe the Void...*

I tried to ignore the halfling's obvious showmanship in favor of perhaps gleaning some useful information from his adventurers. At the very least the Wastes were no playground, so he was better off than a lot of halflings. *Though he might not have much on that other fellow... what was his name, the one with Jyheirad... Frondo!* "Have you seen any cities out in the wastes, perhaps?"

Come on, Vendigroth... tell me you've seen Vendigroth! Oh, who am I kidding? It's never that easy. "Well, it's pretty empty out there, and I haven't been exploring all that long. But I found this one city, way out in the wastes, surrounded by shifting sands. No roads led into or out of the place. There was no obvious entrance, so I climbed the surrounding wall. From that vantage I could see the whole place."

Well, Vendigroth certainly wouldn't have any roads... "Anyone live there?"

"Yeah, there were a lot of people inside, lots of different races. Everyone was wearing robes and acting very polite and all."

Bah, of course not. Bloody Tulla. Still, it might be a start... if they'd even let me in. "Did you go inside?" If they wouldn't let a little halfling like this in, I stood no chance.

He merely shrugged, "No, I climbed back down and left. Bigger folk have their own ways, and I won't be disturbing them." *Bloody useless... what kind of adventurer are you?! Right... a halfling 'adventurer'.*

I sighed, trying not to let my annoyance show. "Would you please show me where it is on my map?" I held my map out to him, smiling sweetly.

He looked up at me and grinned in response, pointing a stubby finger towards a spot on the northern end of the wastes. "There, it was right there!" He seemed so absolutely proud of himself. I wanted to pat him on the head, but it would've been more than a little insulting.

I suppose the little fellow's not so bad after all. Perhaps I can get a bit more out of him... "Thank you so much, Weldo. Say, have you found anything else out there in the wastes?"

"Well, yes, actually. I found a very interesting device on a foray near here."

He holds up a rather small, peculiar item for me to look at.

"Found it in some old ruins out in the wastes."

The object he held out didn't seem particularly impressive, though I could tell just by the feel it gave off that it had once been a part of a much larger piece of machinery. *No doubt, that came from the ruins I'm looking for...* "Really?" I pressed him for more information.

Naturally, he was happy to share. "Yes. The ruins were made of a metal of a sort I've never encountered before. There was all manner of junk around and inside them. I found this device while rummaging through it! Some nasty lizards must live underneath it, though, because they swarmed out at the noise and I had to retreat a ways."

Well, that'll be a load of fun, I'm sure. "Sounds bad."

"Well, you have to expect danger in my line of work."

I had to try desperately to contain my laughter. He seemed so damned serious about it. Even Franklin wasn't serious about his adventures! Still, it felt wrong to demean the poor bastard just because of his small stature. "One last thing before I go... could you tell me of the kinds of monsters you've seen out there in the desert?"

He nodded excitedly, happy just to have somebody who was interested in chatting with him. "I have seen all kinds of strange critters. I've seen giant spiders with the upper body of a woman! That wasn't the strangest thing, though."

I had seen the type of creature he was mentioning, recently in fact. They'd accosted me on my way off of Thanatos. I hadn't thought much of them at the time considering where I was, and the myriad of

other dangers to worry about, but I supposed they were a bit strange. It didn't surprise me that they would exist around Vendigroth as well. "What could be stranger than that?"

His eyes grew wide as he described what he'd seen, "Once I saw the darndest thing. Deep in the desert, I saw a rock stand up and move around. I swear it looked at me, too!"

At last I couldn't help myself and I burst out laughing. I'd killed over a dozen of the damned things in the past. They were unpleasant foes, but I'd learned to deal with them well enough. Weldo didn't look terribly pleased at my laughter. I tried to mask my mirth with a question, "Did you attack it?" He didn't seem to be terribly convinced. "Such a typical question... no, I did not. I left."

The way he contorted his face and scowled at me as he answered, I could tell our conversation was done. At the very least I'd gotten the location of Tulla, and it seemed I could go there to find more information about Vendigroth or the wastes in general. "Good day to you, Weldo. Thank you for the information."

He called out hesitantly as I departed, "You're welcome, madam. Come back anytime!" I felt bad for laughing at him, it was just so hard to take him seriously.

The bridge had massive gears on its sides, though I couldn't tell what purpose they could possibly have served. It was lengthy, as far as bridges went, but the chasm separating the wastes from the rest of the mainland was quite legendary in its width. I wondered idly if that had been the reason for the bridge's construction from metal, or if that had merely been an artifact of its Vendigrothian construction.

Well, here we are... the wastes of Vendigroth. My limbs nearly tingled with anticipation. I knew not what dangers lay ahead for me, nor what priceless treasures I might uncover in such an ancient and powerful city. In stark contrast, before I could dig right in I would have to put up with the pompous and arrogant mages of Tulla.

Funny how the center of the magickal world and the center of the technological one have coexisted next to each other peacefully for so

many years... Hmph. 'Existed'... 'Peaceful'... perhaps it's not so odd after all. Whatever Vendigroth was, I was sure it wasn't going to be peaceful.

Chapter the Sixty Fourth: They Say The Uncomfortable Itching Is A Sure Sign Of Magic About

My skin began to itch long before I could see the sand-colored walls in the distance. This was definitely going to be a most uncomfortable visit. Drawing near the gate to Tulla, I saw two sets of intricately carved statues sitting just outside of the wall. Even from a distance I could tell they were far too detailed to have been crafted by human hands... dwarven, perhaps, but I knew that dwarves had nothing to do with this place. No, these statues and likely the entire city had been carved purely through the force of magick.

I shuddered unconsciously, the very idea of such a heavy concentration of magick deeply disturbing me. When I finally neared the 'gate' itself, if it could even be called such a thing, the itching on my skin became quite intense. Somehow it was even worse than being in the presence of the Silver Lady. She was powerful, that was for certain, but nothing compared to such a large gathering of mages in a city built purely of magick, no matter how much less powerful any individual mage might be.

There was a robed man standing next to one of the finely carved statues, calling out to me as I wandered nearby, "Greetings, traveler." His voice was calm and even, as though he was completely unsurprised to find a wandering band of technologists in the middle of the desert.

Despite his attitude, I didn't expect we were exactly common. *Maybe I'm wrong... no, I can't be... the itching, the robes... this has to be Tulla...* I looked at the robed man questioningly, "What is this place?" He looks at me for a moment before responding. "Ah, it is you. Jorian told us to be expecting you. You may enter."

He looked me over for a moment before responding, "Ah, it is you. Jorian told us to be expecting you. You may enter."

"Thank you." *Oh, I'm so glad to have your permission.* I nearly rolled my eyes. *Wait... expecting me?* "But who is Jorian? And what is this place?" It always annoyed me when my questions were ignored, and my annoyance showed through in my voice.

He seemed unperturbed at my attitude. "Jorian the diviner. He is inside, waiting for you... and this place, this place is Tulla, the city of mages. To enter, just walk through the pillars." *Why do I not like the sound of that?*

I stared down the pillars hatefully, not entirely trusting them to work properly for a woman like me. I supposed it was possible that they could work, but it was also possible that I would violently explode... or they would... or anything in-between. I glanced back at my companions, "Perhaps we should go one at a time. Any volunteers?"

Virgil gave me a shrewd stare, "How uncharacteristically brave of you." *Do shut up.* He shrugged and walked through the pillars. No sooner had he stepped between them than he was enveloped in a bright violet flash. I'd come to recognize that color as the color of Conveyance magick. Virgil hadn't even taken another step before he disappeared from my sight entirely.

"You know," Sebastian scratched his head, "Just because the most magey person among us can get through doesn't mean a damn thing to the rest of us." He had a point.

Franklin didn't seem to care, "Well, now, it wouldn't be an adventure if everything went our way, would it?! FRANKLIN PAYNE is not afraid of magick, or of danger! Onward and upward and all that business! Ha!" He strolled through the gate enthusiastically before any of the rest of us could even think to stop him. The violet light encompassed him as well, with perhaps a slight crackle, and then he vanished before our eyes.

I stared at Vollinger uncomfortably, "They ARE expecting us. What if this is some kind of trap? How do we know that we'll all wind up in

the same place when we're through - and what if that place is a horrible, demon-filled dungeon?"

He merely shrugged. "I do not think Tulla is known for keeping demons as servants. Elementals, perhaps, but not demons." Despite his nonchalance, I noted he wasn't exactly volunteering to go next.

Sebastian spit on the rocky sands next to his feet and made a run for it, straight through the pillars. Once again, a violet light shone forth and enveloped him, then he disappeared. *That was awfully hasty, now wasn't it?* Terry barked at him fiercely before chasing through the pillars as well. Even he was enveloped by that same light, disappearing like the rest.

Bloody hell. Even if it is a trap, I can't just abandon Virgil or the others. I stepped up to the edge of the pillars nervously, closing my eyes to avoid making myself sick. I could feel a horrible burning on my skin and I grew very suddenly nauseous as the whole of Arcanum seemed to move around me. As quickly as the feeling had overtaken me it had passed, and I opened my eyes to find myself inside of the city proper with the others all staring at me, chuckling. Vollinger blinked into the city with a burst of violet shortly after.

A pair of scaled beasts stood at the end of the entryway to the city, and two more pairs stood at the exits to either side. They seemed a touch scrawny compared to similar beasts I'd felled in the past, but they probably didn't get much in the way of actual food. Bloody magickers probably had them bound into servitude, regardless of how poorly they were treated. I certainly didn't see any restraints holding them in place and they were far more still than even the best trained of animals. The only part of them that moved was their eyes, following every movement I or my companions made.

I wandered off to the side of the city, uncomfortable but wanting to explore it despite my discomfort. The more I knew the easier I would feel about confronting that Jorian fellow, and perhaps getting the answers I came for. *Well, I didn't bloody plan on making a trip to this place, but while I'm here I might see if they've got a cure for lycanthropy as well... I'm still trying to help you, David...*

The first thing I noticed were a series of strange symbols on the ground. Most of them were familiar in some fashion, though I couldn't quite place them. Once I recognized the symbol of the college of conveyance it all clicked... they were symbols representing all of the magickal colleges. I hadn't spent terribly much time studying them, but I at least had the smallest bit of knowledge pertaining to them. I stepped onto one and thought I could see a light shining out from underneath it, but it was difficult to tell in the early morning light. Even if it had lit up, what purpose that would serve I couldn't tell.

On my way around the city I saw plenty more of the strange symbols, as well as numerous other beastly or otherworldly servants. Naturally, several robed figures wandered about as well. Truly, I was in Hell. I passed around an ornate archway decorated with more ornate statues carved in the form of robed angels, being careful to not actually pass underneath the damned thing lest I find myself somewhere else entirely. Beyond that was a truly massive building, one so large that it dwarfed even Bates' mansion and might have rivaled the castle of Caladon itself. I climbed the short stairway leading inside and gasped at the sheer decadence I found.

Books as far as the eye could see, tapestries hung on the walls, and lavishly woven carpets decorating the floor. The walls were carved out of smooth stone, and rounded pillars decorated each corner. They even had living plants lining a few of the hallways, but considering the lack of light I knew they were kept alive through the power of magick alone. My skin burned just thinking about it and I itched at it unconsciously.

I wandered off down a side hall, instantly lost in the myriad of passages open to me. It always seemed that, when presented with a path leading straight forward and one that would double back twelve times before finally reaching my destination, I would choose the latter near one hundred percent of the time. It wasn't really a conscious thing, but I was sure it annoyed my companions all the same. I wandered around the halls for what seemed like an hour before finally stumbling into a room where a robed man greeted me with annoyance in his voice. "Yes? Can I do something for you?"

The sweat on his brow suggested I didn't make him any more comfortable than he did me. "Who might you be?"

"I am Ved Eckes, the master of hydromancy here in Tulla."

I spoke without thinking, "Hydromancy?" I wasn't accustomed to people using such a fanciful term to describe 'water magic'. That kind of pomposity would be likely to start a fight anywhere else besides Tulla. I supposed it was lucky for the arrogant bastard in front of me that this wasn't anywhere else.

He very nearly rolled his eyes. "The magick pertaining to the purest of the elements, water. You must be the wanderer." I could barely stand his smug, pretentious attitude.

Yes, I wander. How many bloody people in this hellhole are expecting me, anyway? Did Jorian print up bloody flyers and force his students to hand them out? "How did you know that?"

He started pacing back and forth with his arms folded behind him, a concerned look on his face. "Well, we have a situation which has developed since you have been here. We are not equipped... there is a good reason we only accept students who are of a very young age, or those that have not been to the cities. Travelers such as yourself are rare, and your effect on our students is easily controlled..."

'Since I have been here'? I came into the city two hours ago at most! What the bloody hell are you going on about? Whatever it was, I certainly didn't do it. "What is your point?" My dislike for the man in front of me was only growing. I hated how he all but admitted that the only students they could manage to keep were the ones that didn't know any better. "We cannot have immature minds that have been influenced by the outside world living here. Tulla needs to maintain its... its philosophical purity, as it were, to retain our effectiveness as a refuge for pure magick. Since you have been here in Tulla, a problem has arisen with one of our former students."

Right, so as long as you keep them in the dark you can expect them to continue naively believing the hogwash you stuff down their throats. I gritted my teeth, trying not to upset the man. I could upset whoever I bloody pleased when I had my answers, but until then I had to be on my best behavior. My invitation to their 'wonderful' city could easily

be rescinded. "What does this have to do with me?" *Bloody nothing, that's what, you just like pointing your damned fingers at the technologist.*

He sighed hesitantly, almost as if he suddenly became bored. "I am... we here at Tulla are not much for open conflict." *Way to ascribe your own failings to every other sap in the place... not that it's far from the truth anyway.* "This could be a difficult situation to negotiate. I was wondering if you would care to help us out in this matter?"

Absolutely bloody not, I'm not helping you bastards one bit... though it would be nice to have somebody here ingratiated to me, and did you say something about negotiating...? "Possibly. What would I need to do?"

His eyes turned dark as he started explaining exactly what his problem was, "I made the questionable choice of sending out one of our students to retrieve a gem that would be useful to me in my water magicks. That was over one hundred and twenty days ago."

I failed to see how a bumbling student that went missing over three months prior was my fault, but if pointing his finger at me made him feel better than that was his problem and not mine. If he did it again I just might chop that damned finger off. *Now, now... I can't be getting riled up so easily... I've got to make a good impression, get what I need, and get the bloody hell out.* "Do you want me to try and find him?" He sighs.

"There is no need. He has returned, and is waiting at the front gate. But he has been gone too long. We cannot possibly allow him to return to his studies here; he has been contaminated by the outside world. By the gods, he is even wearing technologically enhanced armor!"

"As I said, we are not much for open conflict. What we need you to do is to meet with him and convince him to give us the gem, and to leave peaceably. This is no longer the place for him. I will give you a Robe of Fire Resistance in consideration of your help in this matter." He nodded satisfactorily as if a bloody robe did me any good.

You've got to be bloody kidding me...! That's horrible! "I don't think it is right for you to do this after what he did for you." 'Philosophical purity' or not, they couldn't just kick the poor sod out after all the trouble he went through to get their precious bloody gem.

He shook his head unsympathetically, not caring one whit what I thought. "The light of reality is a harsh one. The purity of the school here in Tulla must be maintained. Albert knew the risks when he volunteered."

I could spot a liar a mile away, and V'ed Eckes was most certainly a bloody liar. "What if he becomes violent?" *Don't you dare...*
"Ha! My only concern is the retrieval of the eye."

Ugh... you are a foul bastard, aren't you? Only caring about your bloody gem and that 'philosophical purity' hogwash. I sighed, glaring at the man with hatred in my eyes, "Alright, I will return with the gem." If anybody could get the gem and sent the gent on his way happily it would be me. By doing this favor I could at least defuse a potentially violent situation, and get in the good graces of the locals.

He nodded at me curtly, "I will speak with you when you have the gem." *I see how it is... I'm just a bloody tool to be used as you please, and if I'm not being of use to you then I ought to go about fixing that. Damn the whole lot of you arrogant bastards!* I left V'ed Eckes' room and continued to wander about the halls of the building, hopelessly lost. I suspected I was getting closer to the exit, but in truth I wasn't rightly sure.

At the very least the chamber seemed to be widening out considerably, so I was either nearing the exit or even more hopelessly lost than I thought possible. The grand room that I found myself in had a full wall dedicated to a rather unusual mural. I stopped in front of it, glancing over it curiously.

Hm. Well, yes, that would be all of the colleges... As much as I could recognize several of the smaller symbols, that didn't hold true for the five larger ones. I wrote it off for the moment, figuring it to be just another fanciful decoration crafted purely through the abuse of magicks. Passing by it, I slipped down a small hallway in hopes that it would lead me to the exit.

Unfortunately it only lead me to another myriad of twisting and turning passageways. The damned labyrinth of a building I found

myself in was an atrocity of design, assuredly crafted for the sole purpose of confusion. I wouldn't have been surprised if magick had been leveraged in its creation to make the hallways even more confoundingly confusing, teleporting unsuspecting wanderers between halls that looked exactly like one another. It was just the kind of thing those damned mages would do, too.

After winding around and around for nearly another hour I finally popped into a room to get some bloody directions. The woman inside wore dark green robes and she stared at me, almost amused, as I entered. I glared back at her angrily, "So... what are you the master of, mage?"

She didn't take kindly to my tone, and she responded in kind. Her voice was firm and commanding, as I would expect from any mage of significance. "I am S'Btin'ka, 'Mistress' of Morphing Magick." *Well, that's a hell of a name.* She stressed the word 'mistress' insultingly, as though referring to her in any other fashion was improper. The arrogance made me sick.

Hmmm. Morphing magick...? Perhaps I ought not be in such a hurry to get on the bad side of every mage I come across. "Do you know anything that will cure a werewolf, Mistress?"

"Restore a person who has become infected by a werewolf? It is a very difficult potion to create, taking years to prepare correctly. Its making is a closely held secret here in Tulla."

Damned mages and their bloody secrets... don't you care that a poor girl is suffering? "There is a girl in Caladon with the affliction."

She nodded at me smugly, "Ah, certainly, so you wish to acquire the cure on her behalf, then? Considering the difficulty in creating it, I think 1,000 coins would be a generous price."

"My! That is expensive!" *Bloody, pompous, arrogant, unsympathetic, bastard mages!* I sighed, heavily considering whether or not I ought just steal the damned thing and, in the end, deciding against it. It didn't seem like me to pay for full price, but I wouldn't know one damned potion from the next. I could try bringing Cynthia a stolen cure only to find out it was poison. I couldn't do that to poor David.

"Here. I have the coin." I tossed her a sack of coin angrily.

I wanted to knock that smug grin right off her arrogant face. "Thank you. Here you are..." She handed me a rather small vial and I stuffed it into my purse, carefully noting what it looked like so I didn't confuse it with any of the other vials I had with me. If nothing else I could probably tell by which bottle made me itch the worst. "I pray you are in time, and that no one has destroyed the girl you are attempting to help. Good luck."

Hmph. As if you really care. 'Destroyed'? What kind of way is that to talk about Cynthia? I gritted my teeth, trying to be polite to the last. "Thank you, madam. Goodbye." I turned and stormed out of her room angrily. I let my frustration get the better of me, storming down passages seemingly at random. *Who the hell do these bastards think they are, anyway? Son of a bitch! I hate this place!* I stopped when I reached a rather sizeable staircase leading upwards.

I stared at it curiously. *Somehow I don't think that's the way out...* Against my better judgment, I climbed up the staircase. At the top I found myself in a wide hallway with a single door at the far end, guarded by a controlled beast and a man wearing a robe. *Always with the bloody robes.* I approached him, but he didn't seem to particularly notice or care. He just kept staring off into space as though I didn't even exist. "Uh, excuse me?" "Ah, it is the wanderer. You are here to speak with Simeon Tor."

Of all the ways I've ever been greeted, that's a new one. "I am?" I could already tell that I wasn't going to like the bastard in front of me one bit, but I was starting to realize the same could be said of any who lived in Tulla. If I'd found anybody I didn't hate outright I was sure they would be an exception to the rule.

The man in front of me smiled wryly, continuing to speak as though I hadn't just asked him a bloody question. "Before you may see him, you must do something for me."

I am going to chop off your head and stuff it up the backside of your bloody robe. I spoke through gritted teeth, "Please, sir, I am looking for extremely important information."

He shrugged casually, staring at me intently. "That may be."

I sat there, tapping my foot, staring at him back. After several moments passed I finally spoke again, "Listen. Nasrudin sent me! I don't have much time!"

"That is not how I see it."

If I let you walk away from this conversation alive I would be doing a disservice to mankind. I idly wondered if the know-it-all bastard in front of me could read my mind to see just how much I hated him. "Then you know what I am doing?"

He didn't move a single muscle, he just continued staring and spoke tersely and cryptically. "Perhaps."

Forget my bloody axe, I AM GOING TO STRANGLE YOU WITH MY BARE HANDS! "Then please let me in, I beg of you. I've no time for this foolishness." I was at least somewhat proud of myself for how well I maintained my composure despite the severe annoyance gnawing at me.

As smugly and calmly as ever he still stood there, completely unmoving, deflecting me with what seemed like utterly childish responses. "That is not how this works."

How this works is that I beat you until you let me enter! "What? How does it work then?! What do you want from me?!" *Stupid bloody mages! They think they're just SO damned important...! ARGH!*

"Go and gaze upon the mural in the main hall. It is near a glowing circle on the floor. I am certain you must have passed it on your way in here. And then you may enter to see Simeon Tor."

I gritted my teeth. *That's it? The mural? You want me to look at the bloody mural that I ALREADY LOOKED AT?!* "I have already looked at the mural. May I pass now?"

He remained standing there as infuriatingly as ever. "But you have not understood. You must look upon it again, and then you may enter."

"AUGH!" I screamed in frustration and stormed down the stairway, going straight back into the hall where I'd found the mural in the first place. If I hadn't been so annoyed I would've been amused that it was practically right next to the stairs, despite the hour long detour I took in going from the one place to the other. I glanced at the mural casually, then turned and shouted at my companions, "There! I've looked at the mural again, have I not? Did you all see me look at the bloody mural?"

Virgil nodded uncomfortably, "Y-yes... perhaps you should rest for a bit, maybe calm down?"

Vollinger shrugged, "Yes, you've looked at the mural twice now, as have all of us. Indeed, it would be difficult to miss."

"Yeah, I see it," Sebastian spat, "and I see that you saw it, too. Doesn't make any more sense this time than it did the last. What the hell is that bastard's problem anyway? Thinking he can just boss you around... heh, if he pushes his luck any further I bet he'll be in for a rude awakening."

"You're damn right he will be!" I agreed. "Franklin?" I looked at him curiously.

He was studying the mural carefully, "I say, this feels like a bloody waste of time if I ever saw one. They call this a mural? I've seen better painted by low-cost orcish laborers! Ha!"

"It's settled, then," I affirmed. Noting that I was far from the only one annoyed at the pointless waste of time, I stormed back up the stairs. I was about to scream at the bastard in rage when he stepped off to the side of the door and spoke again.

"You have seen the mural. You may now enter to speak with Simeon Tor."

All right... it's over now... he moved out of the way. No good can come of throttling him... I'll be good... I have to be good. "But why did you have me look at the mural?"

It had been a severe mistake to ask him a question, especially that

question. "Because that is what you needed to do." *I want you to die.*

"That is not an answer!" My frustration was finally breaking through my calm facade. I couldn't hold it in any longer.

He didn't move a single muscle. "That is the only answer there is."

I stormed past him as rudely as I possibly good, "I can see this will lead nowhere. Good day." *Death is too good for you. I'll save killing you for somebody that'll make it painful.* I shoved open the door in front of me angrily and stormed into the room. I stopped dead in my tracks when my eyes finally took in exactly what that room contained.

My anger faded near immediately when I saw it. The room contained half a dozen windows that looked to show everywhere from the Ring of Brodgar to Tarant. The room itself was massive, far moreso than I'd expected it to be considering the simple door that lead to it. In the center was an old man with gray hair wearing a deep blue robe. He stood in front of his smooth, lavish desk and studied me carefully. The severe itching that I felt as his gaze passed over me told me he was almost as powerful as the Silver Lady... perhaps moreso, but in a different way entirely. He raised a single finger, beckoning me closer, and my skin itched even worse at that simple movement. "You've come seeking... information?"

His voice was deep and powerful, and he pronounced every one of his words slowly and purposefully. I broke out of my trance as he spoke, realizing that I hadn't come to Tulla just to gander foolishly at all of the magickal wonders one could find there. "Nasrudin has sent me to find the location of the Vendigroth ruins."

"Pelorian."

He lets the name hang in the air a few moments before continuing. "Pelorian is the only one who can answer the question for you."

Well, he might be half deaf, but at least he knows how to answer my question instead of being an arrogant bastard about it. "Are you not surprised that I've spoken with Nasrudin?" Even as soon as I said it I realized how foolish I must have sounded. If somebody had said something similar to me not two months prior I'd have laughed at them like the fool they were.

Simeon merely shrugged. "Nasrudin speaks to us all, at one time or another."

Well, do I ever have news for you. "You don't understand. I spoke with him, directly. He's alive, on the island of Thanatos!"

He seemed to think it over for several moments before responding. "That is... interesting."

"Interesting? Isn't that a bit of an understatement?" *I swear, you bastards are the most boring bunch of bloody old codgers I have ever met... and damned infuriating, too.*

"It's intriguing, I will grant you that. But I can only assume he has his reasons for staying hidden all these years. Who would be able to see Nasrudin's motives? If he can keep himself alive for two thousand years, he is willing, though... I would be appreciative were you to share your tale with me."

I got the feeling that Simeon was just patronizing me by asking me to share, but I obliged nonetheless. It would've been childish not to. I told him of my trip to Thanatos, and Nasrudin's old shack sitting right there where I expected to find a grave. I even related Nasrudin's reasons for remaining hidden, and of the horrible shame he felt regarding Arronax. I finished with Nasrudin's request that I retrieve the Vendigroth device. Simeon barely even twitched the entire time I was talking.

When I was finally finished, he spoke again. "Your story rings true, despite its implausibility. But as I have said, Pelojian is the only one who may be able to help you." *Right... he was bloody patronizing me.*

I sighed, feeling the fool for having babbled on at such length.

"Where can I speak with him?" *If it's not one bloody errand it's another. When can I just get a straight bloody answer?*

"How," He corrected me, much to my annoyance. "How is the question, not where. Pelojian is dead. Has been for a thousand yeras." *You could've told me before. Besides, what does that mean, anyway? Nasrudin's been dead for 2,000.*

I tapped my foot on the polished, stone floor irritably. I bloody hated the attitude of most mages. *Is it a requirement to be arrogant and self-important? Can you not work the more powerful magicks if you don't act like you're better than everybody else?* "Okay, then, HOW do I speak with him?"

"Who knows? Since his death he has appeared every night at midnight. He floats there for an hour, and then fades away. No one has ever been able to get him to speak. You must find a way to bring his voice forth."

Of course! It's never bloody simple, is it?! You could be a bit more helpful, you know. Whatever. If there's a way, I'll find it... no thanks to you.

"Alright, who was this Pelojian?"

Simeon turned around quite rudely, glancing through one of the windows behind him and just watching the scene behind it. When he spoke he didn't even have the decency to look me in the face.

"Pelojian. Clairvoyant. Artist. Poet. Founder of Tulla."

So that's the bloody bastard I have to thank, is it? Dear Pelojian, I hate your city, Love Samantha. "Can you tell me anything about his art?" If Pelojian's ghost continually reappeared nightly, surely there was a reason... perhaps he'd left a clue.

Simeon continued looking through the windows all around the room, occasionally switching which one he was looking at. "He was an artist of great talent. His paintings are said to help those who meditate on them become closer to achieving oneness. His best work, in my opinion, is the aptly named Mural of Enlightenment."

That would be the bloody mural that bastard made me look at... a second time. "Yes, the bast- man outside your door sent me to look at it before he would let me in here."

Simeon turned back around, glancing at me thoughtfully, "Really? Jorian did that? That's interesting."

Ah, so that's the very bastard that foresaw my coming here in the first place.... hmmm. "Who is that Jorian fellow, anyway?"

"Jorian is the masterr of Divination here in Tulla. A bit of the

dairvoyant in him, there is. Jorian never has anyone do anything for no real reason, of that you can be certain. He knows more than he is letting on, I feel."

Ugh, I can't believe I'm going to subject myself to this. Why?! Is this some cruel joke?! "Well, I'll go speak with him further, then."

Simeon shook his head, and for once I was glad. "It will do you no good. He has revealed everything he is going to. And if I know him, it was not very much."

You know him all right. ...and you don't have to tell me twice, if you say not to talk to him then I bloody won't talk to him. "What is the mural meant to represent?"

He merely shrugged, losing interest in our conversation again and turning back to his windows. *Would it kill you to just have a normal conversation?* "No one knows, really. The largest symbol is thought to possibly represent a lost college of magick, but no one can say for sure."

I can see this is going nowhere as well. You're all just SO bloody helpful.

"Can you tell me anything of Pelojian's poetry, then?"

"His poetry. Well, a bit overwhelming for some. But to those who study his paintings, the poems seemed to reveal his inner self in a way few could understand. We don't know why his poetry was special to him. All we have are others' thoughts about it."

"So the answer to making him speak could be in his poetry?" *...and you all bloody lost it? Are you TRYING to be useless?* It would only make sense that the one thing I needed was the one thing that was missing. Everything always turned out like that. It just wouldn't be an adventure if I ever FOUND what I was looking for.

Simeon shrugged, not even turning. "Perhaps, perhaps." He couldn't have seemed any less detached if he'd put effort into it, though he didn't seem like a man that really put effort into anything.

I grumbled, "I need some sort of clue to go on. Where do I start looking?" I refused to believe that the man in front of me couldn't be of any use besides dropping a single name.

Once again, he didn't even turn to answer me. "That is not the way this works. The path is yours to tread, no one else's."

Bloody bastard mages! So you're going to do whatever you can to be entirely useless just because it's not your place to help me? What the hell kind of logic is that?! "Fine. You mentioned he was clairvoyant?"

"Yes... that is why I believe that even had he not seen the ruins that you seek, he could give you the answers that you seek. It is believed that his writings and his paintings foretold future events. Much of what he wrote has come to pass."

Except that the writings are gone now... no thanks to you. It was difficult to ignore the sheer incompetence of the 'master mage' in front of me. If Tulla had leaders like that, no wonder it was so bloody hopeless. "What things has he foretold?" As long as he was speaking, I was going to do whatever I could to keep him at it. He might let something useful slip by accident.

"He saw many things, things that most refused to believe..." Simeon wandered over towards the window leading to Stillwater and seemingly breathed in the air around it. It seemed like a rather odd thing to do.

If you answered my question any more specifically I might die from shock. "Wow, that's impressive. I can't understand their disbelief..." My sarcasm was palpable.

He actually laughed, then, which truly did surprise me. I didn't think the old bastard had a sense of humor. "I appreciate your humor, but all I can tell you is that things are the way they need to be."

It must be so bloody reassuring to put so much stock in vague assurances that everything is fine. As much as I wanted to just abandon my quest, I couldn't let this group of isolated, self-satisfied, smug bastards deter me from doing what I knew was right. I only wished I could be half as lazy and still get anything done. "You said he was the founder of Tulla?" I thought that perhaps he might've buried some secrets in its construction.

"Pelojian was born to great wealth, but his spirit was that of a

wandering mystic. He would not allow himself to live a life of leisure. When, in his travels, he found only arrogance, greed and the thirst for power... he wandered out into the wasteland, and it was here that he found what he was looking for."

Boy, have his students ever fallen far from his example. "What was he looking for?" Certainly not the collection of sorry bastards that can be found here today.

Simeon wandered over to the window showing Caladon and stared through it intently for several moments before answering. "Clarity. A singular consciousness. A place he could start a new philosophy of magick. He gathered young, promising disciples around him and created this marvelous place, a beacon to all those that would pursue the ways of magick with a pure heart."

...and over the years those disciples became smug, arrogant, and self-satisfied, never taking the effort to even lift a finger for the rest of their bloody days... "This is fascinating, but what am I to do now?" You had better answer that.

He shrugged, "Only you can determine that." *I think you've been spending far too much time around Jorian.*

As much as I sincerely hated his unwillingness to tell me anything that could be of any real use, I asked one last question before leaving. My curiosity was killing me. "What are all these windows? Are they pictures?"

"These? No, they are portals to other places... an indulgence, but I find it soothing to gaze through them."

That's actually somewhat of a frightening thought... but leave it to mages to be truly lazy. "Portals? Can they be used to get to those places?"

He nodded at me confidently, "Of course." I expected as much, really... a mage wouldn't go to all that trouble if it didn't somehow save him some work in the end.

I crossed my arms and grinned at Simeon slyly, "Can I use them?" After the debacle at the gate to Tulla I suspected I would be able to,

but that wasn't the question I was asking. I was more curious if he'd let me, considering just how intent he was on being unhelpful.

He shrugged casually, "Of course." *Well, color me surprised.* "When you have completed the task Nasrudin has sent you on, you may have complete use of them."

Oh, that makes perfect sense... as soon as I accomplish a nigh impossible task without the slightest bit of help, THEN I can use your lazyman's shortcut. That figures. "Thank you, I think. I'll be going, now." I turned and left the room with a sigh.

I glared hatefully at Jorian as I passed him, fingering the handle on my axe unconsciously - I did so desperately hate the bastard. The hallway at the bottom of the stairs lead most directly to the mural, and I figured on trying to find my way out of the massive building from there. Luckily, the largest other exit to the room lead practically straight out. It seemed unusual how the building could have so many halls, twisting and turning around each other, yet still be quite easy to leave as long as you could find your way back to the main path. *Bloody mages.*

At last, having exited, I set out to accomplish what I wanted to when I first tried to leave. I strolled back to the gate, warping back outside much to my own discomfort. Thankfully, once the burning ceased, my skin itched significantly less outside than it did inside. Almost immediately I found myself standing face to face with a man in a full suit of machined plate. It was quite marvelously constructed, in fact. He spoke up the second he saw me.

"Are you here to let me in? I don't understand why that imbecile of a guard won't let me enter."

"Are you here to let me in? I don't understand why that imbecile of a guard won't let me enter."

Oh boy, this is not going to be fun. "Uh, not exactly." It shamed me that I was starting to sound just as cryptically useless as the bloody mages I'd been dealing with for the past several hours.

The man in front of me was quite rightfully aggravated. "What do you mean? I've been out here for months looking for this damned gem!

The monsters I've had to fight and the ludicrous things people had me do for them so that they would tell me the slightest bit of information! You wouldn't believe it!"

"Actually, I would." *Oh would I ever... you don't know the half of it, dear boy.* "But why do you want to go back in there?" Convincing him could be very easy or very hard, but the machined plate he wore suggested it might lean towards the former. I could only hope he wasn't quite so daft to think he really needed Tulla anymore.

He didn't seem to get the hint. "This is my home, I wish to return to my studies. I've got the gem," he turned to the guard and started shouting at him, "LET ME IN!"

Oh bother... he really is that dense. I can't blame him, I suppose, he DID study in Tulla... once an idiot always an idiot. "But what of your armor? You're turning towards technology."

"Look, I did what I had to do to get by out there! Enough talk, why won't they let me in?"

"Look, I did what I had to do to get by out there! Enough talk, why won't they let me in?"

I sighed, hating that I had to be the one to do this dirty work. "They feel you'd be a corrupting influence on the school." *Please don't hate me, I'm really trying to help you...*

He didn't really seem to see it that way, and I supposed I couldn't entirely blame him. "Corrupting influence? I risked my life to retrieve this gem for them!"

Poor, poor Albert. Hmm... just how much was that old bastard mage lying to me, anyway...? I decided to put my question to the test. "Master Eckes told me you volunteered."

Albert was furious. "Volunteered?! He asked me to do it for him! How could I refuse, with him being my teacher?" He was focusing less on the guard and more on me, clearly offended at the things I was saying.

That was a good thing, as far as I was concerned. He was right to be

angry, I just had to make him realize who it was right to be angry at. "Yet, you still believed in him enough to listen to him..." *Even though he's a liar and a bastard... at least I'm only the former.*

"What's your point?"

"What's your point?"

He seemed so terribly unsure at that moment, looking up to me for some kind of answer. I didn't feel quite right abusing that trust, but the way I saw it I wasn't abusing it in the slightest. "He sent you out because he knew you didn't belong there."

A look of understanding washed over him and he shook his head uncomfortably. "I have always felt restless here, like I didn't belong..." *Yes, that's right... forget this mage business and go live a happy life, not one of servitude.* Fooling Tullans, even former Tullans, was disturbingly easy.

I placed my hand on his shoulder sympathetically, the tone in my voice urging him to come to the correct realization. "Tulla is too limiting for someone of your experience, now." Sadly, although I was lying through my teeth, I actually meant it. While it was horrible what V'ed did to the poor bastard, he really was better off just leaving quietly.

"You're right! Here's the gem. Please deliver it to Master Eckes for me. Thanks for showing me how I had outgrown this place."

"You're right! Here's the gem. Please deliver it to Master Eckes for me. Thanks for showing me how I had outgrown this place. Good luck to you, friend."

Well, all's well that ends well I suppose. I took the gem from him and smiled, "Good luck to you as well." He turned and stalked back off into the wastes and I stared at the gem for just a moment before wandering back into the city proper. *All that for a bloody water gem? Hmph... and what if he succeeded? Would he next be sent out to 'protect' Tulla from the mutant spider clans living out in the wastes? What a bunch of hogwash.*

I wandered around Tulla some more, killing some time before nightfall. If Pelojian only appeared at midnight I had quite a bit of time to wait. Luckily I spied what looked to be a library, so I took the

opportunity to indulge myself. Unfortunately for me, it was far from empty. There were a couple young mages making quite the ruckus and I couldn't concentrate on reading for the life of me, not to mention most of the books were decidedly slanted in a magickal favor. When I finally had enough of it I stamped up to one of the gentlemen getting on my nerves. "Hello, sir. Might I ask your name?"

He seemed a bit stunned. He glanced at me up and down, then at my axe, and finally at the companions I had following me. I could tell he was curious. "I am Herzod Munk, apprentice-mage in the College of Phantasm! How do you do, madam?"

Sorry, chap, you're a bit young for my tastes... and I dislike mages anyway. "Very well, thank you. What can you tell me of Tulla, Herzod?" *Other than that an outsider like me is much more fascinating?* "Tulla? Oh, it's a wonderful place! Full of such strange things and interesting people. If only I didn't have to do all of this bloody schoolwork! How's a fellow supposed to enjoy himself if his nose is always in the books?"

Yes, I can quite see that you're not one for books, and it grates on the nerves of anybody in here who IS. "Do you have much schooling left?" I was having difficulties seeing just how I could get the bastard out of the library, but if I just kept him talking long enough surely he would provide an opening.

He stammered out his answer nervously, "Oh, not really. A few bothersome papers, some illusionary presentations... nothing all that difficult. Of course, there is the final examination..."

The tone in his voice suggested I'd just found exactly the opening I was looking for. "What does that entail?"

He let out a dejected sigh, clearly unhappy with the idea he was about to share with me. "There's a maze underneath Tulla. It was built by an illusionist centuries ago... an old elf by the name of Fa'al Kin. In order to pass the final exam, I need to retrieve a platinum chalice from the middle of Fa'al Kin's Maze, and bring it back to the Master Illusionist. It's not that I don't think I can do it, it's just that there's so much else I'd rather be doing."

Things that take you out of this library, yes...? "Hmmm. Perhaps I might be able to assist you?" I tried to say it as unsuggestively as possible. He gives me a sly look.

"Now there's a possibility. Yes, that just might work out nicely. That way I could go out later with the boys... there's a fireball tourney later this afternoon that I'd love to play in. Fine! And I've got an old scroll of Phantasmal Fiend around here somewhere. Shall we call that your payment?"

His leaving the damned library would be payment enough, surely.

"Done..." *So sorry, poor boy, but you're being duped by the best.*

He seemed awfully happy about my agreement, and it was painfully obvious that he couldn't tell I was lying. "Very good! The scroll is yours, once you return with the chalice. The entrance to the Maze is just out in the courtyard. It's an archway made of stone. You'll need this coin in order to pass through it and into the Maze." He flipped a small, dull coin at me. "I'll be here when you're done!"

Bloody hell, he expects me to go do it right now... I silently cursed myself for several moments, wondering just how in the hell I could be expected to pass a magickal exam. Wait... that's just it! It's perfect! Having a technologist pass the test will prove to all that it's a bloody farce! There's no better way to undermine this place than to have the students talking about the technologist that passed the final magickal exam...

Really, I was just planning on wasting the time anyway. As much as I loved a good book, undermining the morale of the students sounded much more enjoyable to me. I could be quite the horrible person sometimes.

Chapter the Sixty Fifth: Clever Solutions For A Puzzling World

I exited the library, scowling a bit at my lack of opportunity to actually read anything before leaving. *It's for a noble purpose... or perhaps that should be ignoble. Hmph, same difference.* I noticed the archway Herzod had described to me, though I had actually noticed it on my way around the city earlier. I wandered off towards it, admiring the strange, tranquil fountain sitting between it and the massive building I'd gotten lost in earlier.

Arranged at even intervals around the fountain were more symbols like the ones I'd found on the ground earlier, familiar but differently so from the symbols of the various colleges. *Those are the same symbols I saw on the mural... the larger ones. Hmm... I'd better study this whole damn thing when I get back to the library.* After looking over the symbols for a short while I suddenly remembered that I had a gem to deliver and I slipped inside of the nearby building to take care of that business before it got too late. I didn't like the idea of sticking around after I'd spoken with Pelojian just to wait for some bloody mage to wake up again.

I pulled the water gem out of my pocket, heading towards V'ed Eckes room to drop it off quickly. I was proud of myself for only getting lost four times on my way to the bastard's room. "Greetings, Master Eckes. I... uh... spoke with your student out front." I handed the gem off to him and he grinned at it happily.

"Stupendous!"

He inspects the gem for a moment.

"Thank you for bringing this to me. Here are the robes I promised you."

The man actually stripped buck naked right in front of me and folded up his robes, handing them to me in a pile. *Gods, please... take this back! For the sake of decency put it back on!* I averted my eyes, being

rather uncomfortable in the presence of one so shameless. "Don't you care what happened to your student?"

I saw him shrug out of the corner of my eye and he mumbled in response, too distracted by the water gem to even care what I was saying. "Not particularly. He knew the dangers of becoming enmeshed in the outside world." *Ugh. I beg to differ.* I didn't even excuse myself, I just brushed past the rest of my companions and wandered towards the archway outside. The only thing left to do was clear out the library so I could study until sundown.

Something about the way I left intrigued Franklin and he stared into the room at the man as I departed. I could hear him scoffing offensively. "I'm not one to pass judgment, but for God's sake, man! Put some coverings on, will you?!" *So it's possible to offend Franklin after all. Good to know.* He followed in my direction shortly afterwards.

As I stepped through the archway I could feel the coin in my hand take on a slight chill and my surroundings went near completely dark. It was a sudden shift; I barely had any time to feel nauseous about the whole thing. I stared about the new room I found myself in, noting a dimly lit stone pillar in the center of the room. The room itself was square with smooth, brick walls. There were a pair of chests sitting on the floor and I took a moment to rummage through them.

It seemed like a full set of equipment, minus any armor or a shield. I supposed that made sense for mages. I didn't know exactly what it would be good for, but I suspected it would be useful in the so-called 'exam' that I was supposed to be taking. I looked at the others who seemed to have been transported into the room with me. "Any ideas?"

Virgil looked at me nervously, tapping his foot with that same impatience he always did when I dove headfirst into trouble that I didn't quite know how to get myself out of. "Why do I get the feeling that you're asking me?" I didn't suspect he actually wanted an answer to that question. Even if I'd wanted to give him one, I kept getting distracted by the sound of Terry barking.

"Sebastian, do you know what Terry's going on about? You're not out of jerky already, are you?" He and Terry were sitting in a corner, Terry pawing at something obsessively while Sebastian tried to bring him under control.

"Hey! Samantha!" he shouted. "I think our little buddy here's found something! There's a picture of a ring here drawn in white chalk!" I stopped, thinking on what he said for a moment. Franklin, ever the impetuous one, wandered into the middle of the room and started poking at the pedestal. As soon as he touched it he was transported back to where we came in, looking quite confused.

"That's it!" I shouted excitedly, taking off one of my charged rings and, in its place, slipping on the strange ring I found when I entered. "Terry, Franklin, Sebastian... I owe all three of you thanks."

Sebastian merely grinned and surreptitiously slipped Terry a piece of jerky. Franklin was as jovial as ever. "Happy to be of service, Samantha!" He clearly didn't have the slightest clue what he did, but that didn't stop him from being proud of it. Sometimes it was difficult to tell if I was his traveling companion or his babysitter.

With the ring on my hand, I stepped forward and placed my hand on the stone pedestal. My surroundings shifted, although this time I was better prepared for it. I closed my eyes for just a few moments to let everything settle into place without having to deal with the disorientation of watching it all happen before my very eyes. When I opened my eyes I appeared to be standing right where Franklin had gotten transported to.

"Son of a bitch! I was sure that would work!" *What else could that chalk outline have meant? Terry found it... it means something. That dog never paws at anything unimportant.*

Virgil stammered, "I-I think you'd better take a closer look. There aren't any treasure chests in this room." I glanced around the room cautiously, trying to find where they'd gone off to. Sure enough, they weren't there at all.

"By the Gods, you're right! I did it!" *Hmm, but it's not over yet. I wonder*

if this room has a little cheat diagram as well? I walked slowly around the room, bringing out my electric light to more closely look over the walls. Franklin set his hand on the center pedestal again, merely warping to the edge of the room as he did so. After only a few short steps I found it, my electric light quite clearly revealing a small, chalk diagram of an amulet.

I took the ring off, replacing it with my charged ring once again. Slipping Manno's finger into my purse briefly, I put on the strange amulet and placed my hand upon the center pedestal. Once again, my surroundings shifted and I found myself in what I thought to be a third room. I wandered over towards where I'd found the diagram of the amulet and, just as I expected, it was now missing. "That's it!" I exclaimed, looking at the others. "Each of these rooms has a diagram telling me what to wear to proceed!" I slipped the amulet off and placed Manno's finger back on in its place. It was a tad gruesome, but it was my little good luck charm.

Virgil shook his head, "I don't think that's quite it, Samantha. I suspect that magick really ought to be used in solving these puzzles, but perhaps a previous student left... uh... 'notes'."

"So, you're trying to say that I'm cheating?" I tilted my head at him curiously, almost wanting him to answer affirmatively. He nodded his head 'yes', and I grinned, glancing over towards Sebastian. "Say, Sebastian, good fellow... do you have any problems with cheating our way through this?"

He grinned back at me, "No, ma'am." Franklin laughed uproariously, his usual smarmy laugh, and Terry started sniffing around the edges of the room. I crept along the wall further, illuminating sections of it with my electric light. Virgil could only sigh in response.

"Here you are!" Franklin shouted, "This one looks like a diagram of some kind of helmet! I do hope you're carrying a helmet." I nodded, stowing my chapeau in my purse in favor of the strange, metal helmet I'd found in the entry room. I placed my hand upon the pedestal a third time, transporting the lot of us to a fourth room.

Wordlessly, everybody began searching the moment we entered. Of

all of us, Vollinger was the first one to speak up. "I recommend that you try the boots this time, Samantha. The diagram is right here if you would like to see it yourself." I didn't bother checking, especially since I suspected he might've been offended if I did.

Virgil found the next one, a diagram of a pair of gauntlets. He didn't sound particularly happy about helping me cheat my way through the maze, but as usual he was willing to play along with whatever I decided. *Oh, Virgil, what would I ever do without you?* Once I got to the sixth room I presumptuously held the dagger in my hand and placed my hand on the pedestal without even looking for the diagram. As quickly as we'd arrived we were already gone again, this time into the seventh room.

"Wonderful!" Franklin congratulated me, "How did you know it was that one?" I shrugged, grinning at him. "No, really, I must know! That was spectacular!" He was such a flatterer.

"If you must know, then... it was the only one I hadn't used yet." He paused for a moment, mulling it over, then burst out into a fit of laughter. It was the kind of thing that would amuse him, I suppose.

Vollinger spoke, his voice calm but uncertain, "If that was the last object, how do you suppose we're to get out of this seventh room?" He had a good point. I slumped against the wall for a moment, thinking it over.

"Right here!" Sebastian shouted, "There's a whole bunch of diagrams over here on this wall! Wear 'em all, I say." I looked around at the others, but they only stared back with confused looks. *I suppose it would make an odd sort of sense, and if the diagram says so...* I put all of the various pieces on and I set my hand on the pedestal.

The surroundings shifted yet again and I found myself in another of the growing string of different rooms. Sitting on the ground near the corner, however, was exactly what I had been seeking: the chalice. I walked over to it confidently, plucking it off the ground and stuffing it into my purse. "Well now, isn't that something? A technologist passing the Phantasm final? What does that say about the education here?"

Virgil objected, "...but... you cheated..." I scowled at him and he looked away.

"Shh! They don't have to know that!" I couldn't help but laugh then, and everybody aside from Virgil did the same. I set the pieces of equipment I'd used in navigating the strange little maze on the ground and placed my hand on the center pedestal. That familiar yet uncomfortable feeling of teleportation overtook me once again and at last I found myself back outside. *Now if you don't mind, I've got some bloody books I'd like to read.* The library was my first destination.

Herzod stared at me curiously as I wandered in. I smirked, pulling the chalice out of my purse and handing it to him. "I've retrieved your chalice, boy..."

"You have! That's grand! Here's the scroll I promised you."

He gives it to me.

"Listen... let's keep this between you and I, eh? I don't think the Headmaster would approve of my methods."

Hmph. You mean the methods where a technologist passes your final for you? "Good day." I wasn't going to ruffle his feathers, lest he refuse to leave the library while I still had a chance to do some reading. Word would spread fast enough even without my help, I was sure of it.

Instead I turned my attention towards the bookshelves, searching through them for a book on the basic categories of magick. It seemed important to know exactly what symbol meant what if I was going to solve the mystery of the mural. I pulled out a tome that looked like it covered what I was looking for and sat down to glance at it for awhile.

I skimmed through it hurriedly, but it still took me the better part of three hours to read everything that seemed important. During that time Franklin wandered off and around Tulla several times, each time returning empty-handed. I didn't really know what he was looking for in the first place, other than perhaps a relief to his excessive boredom. Virgil stood next to me protectively, a menacing authority about him, hushing any students that came in. Even a technologist would be put off by the sight of him in his electrified plate, carrying

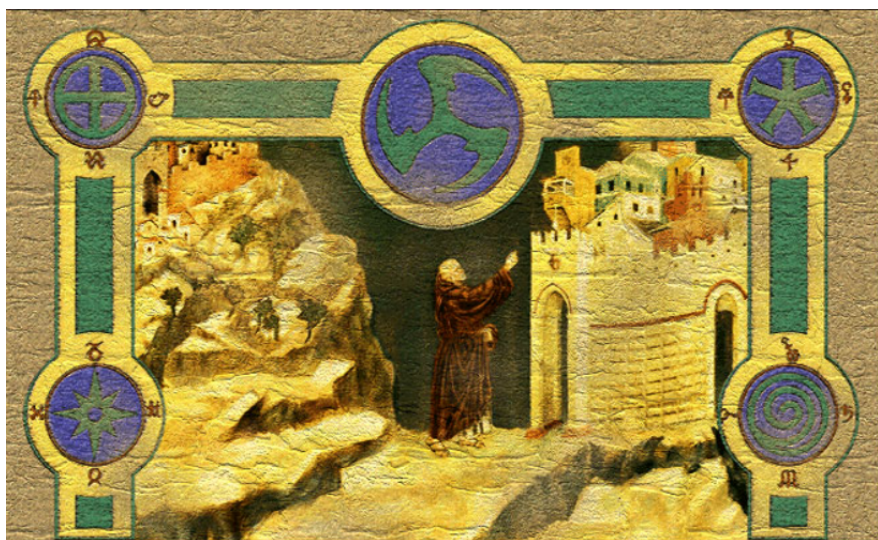
an electrified shield and a flaming axe. Half the students he talked to left without even reading a damned thing.

Sebastian played with Terry gently and quietly, for which I was thankful. It wouldn't have been pretty if that dog got bored. Vollinger seemed satisfied to merely stare out a window peacefully. I was thankful to have such understanding companions, willing to hang around even while I did something as mundane as read a book.

It was nearly evening by the time I finished and I decided to take one last look at the mural before trying to figure out just how in the hell to speak with Pelojian. I stalked into the grand building at the end of Tulla for a third time that day and marched towards the center room, intent on staring at that damned mural for a third time as well.

Bloody Jorian's just lucky I hate violence...

I saw the mural in a rather significantly different light following my study in the library. It had been so long since I read anything that I just soaked up every ounce of knowledge that the book had to give, eager to put it to good use. In turn, some oddities about the mural became quite obvious when I returned to gaze on it. *There... those symbols are the four elements... obviously they're connected somehow.... but in what way?*



The five larger symbols are the ones sitting around that fountain.... hmm, that fountain must be Pelojian's pool now that I think of it. The other sixteen symbols are all magickal ones. The elements are on the upper left and the rest seem to be loosely categorized as well, though none quite so clearly. What then? Sebastian broke my concentration, "Say, I think I've seen those bigger symbols somewhere else before."

I sighed and nodded at him, "Yes. They're around the fountain just behind the archway." He placed his hand up to his chin and thought about it for a bit.

Finally, he shook his head, "No, no that's not it... the archway got me thinking, though... there are a couple buildings on each side of that archway, and I swear I've seen those symbols painted on the sides." *Well, that's news.*

"Really? You're sure?" He nodded. "Let's go take a look!" I darted outside and headed off to the side of the archway. Just as Sebastian had said, there were a pair of buildings on that side, each with one of the symbols painted on them. Further, each one had a magickal symbol on the ground in front of it and that symbol was always the one to the left of the corresponding larger symbol on the mural. I tried the door to one of the buildings, but it was locked by some strange, magickal force.

I'm beginning to see it now... so stepping on the symbol to the left must be what opens the door... then how do the other three symbols fit in? I suppose the position of the man's arm could be referring to a clock. That's it! I should travel the symbols clockwise! It made an odd sort of sense to me, and so I did just that.

Starting with the elements, I first found the symbol of Earth. As I stepped on it a strange light began issuing forth from underneath and around the stone that it was engraved into. *I suppose that's a good sign.* In turn I found the air and water symbols, growing more and more confident as each one lit up with their own strange colors. Finally I approached the building once again and stepped on the symbol of Fire. Like magic, the door opened.

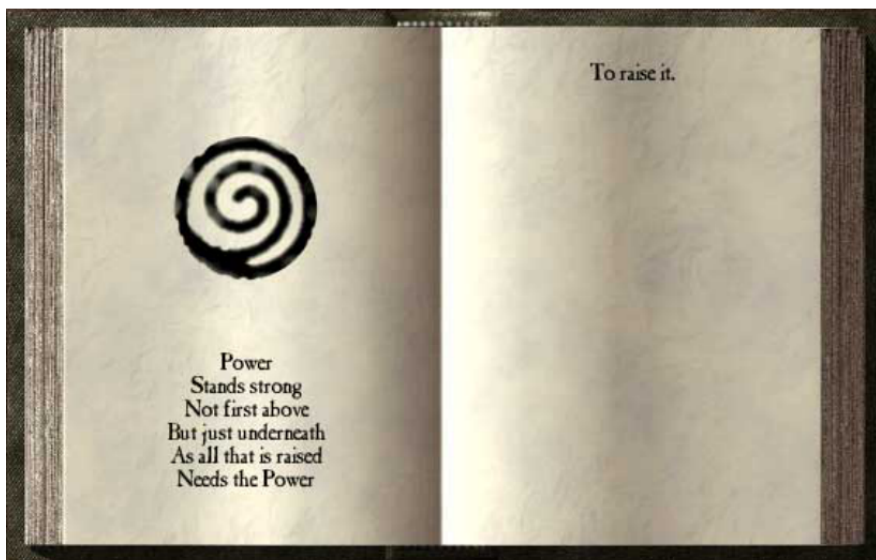
Inside I saw an amulet sitting on the ground as well as a book labeled 'Verses of the Wanderer, Canto 1'. *I knew it... Pelojian's poetry! This is it, I'm on the right track!* I flipped open the front cover of the book and saw a symbol matching that of the building I was in. Beneath the symbol was a simple poem.

*All that comes before
Is rooted in this earth*

*In this water
In this fire
In the air that surrounds us
Not thought of
As last
But as what came first
And the final step
Before you come
To me.*

"Well, that's strange," I remarked aloud, "I get the obvious reference to the elements... clever, that. But the rest of it almost seems like it's beckoning me. 'The final step before you come to me'? It almost seems like it's ascribing an order to the symbols around the fountain... Gods, that's it! His poetry really is the key!" Without waiting to hear my companion's thoughts on the matter I dashed off again.

Conveyance, Forces, Metamorphosis, and finally Phantasm... I stormed inside of the second building, picking up 'Verses of the Wanderer, Canto 3'. I flipped it open and began reading excitedly.



Not first above, but just underneath... so the swirl is second and the cross is last. I continued stepping on the engravings, slowly watching the whole of Tulla light up in strange colors as I activated all of them. Necromantic White, then Black, Summoning, and lastly Nature earned me 'Verses of the Wanderer, Canto 4'.

The tie that binds

*The first to the last
The first to its child
Is the Spirit of all
The Spirit that calls
And the way
Much brighter
Before you.*

If this were the symbol that bound the first to the last, then that meant it could be neither. I already had the second and the last symbols, so that meant the star had to be the third symbol. The only symbol I was missing, the sunburst, had to be the first symbol. I wandered over towards the fountain purposefully.

'Before you come to me'... that fifth symbol must be the symbol of Pelojian, and I'll step on that last. I wandered over towards the sunburst and I stepped on it firmly. Much to my regret, nothing happened. *Blast! Do I need to get the last book before it'll work?* Vollinger cleared his throat and handed to me the amulet I neglected to pick up in the first building. I took it from him sheepishly, "Of course..." Placing it on, I tried stepping on the sunburst again and I was quite delighted when it lit up beneath me.

In turn I stepped on the swirl, the star, the cross, and finally the symbol I had deemed to be Pelojian's symbol. A bright light emanated from the fountain the moment I stepped on the last symbol and I turned to see an illuminated figure slowly rising from the pool's surface, a shimmering wall of water rising around it as it emerged.

The figure formed into a red-hued specter, casting a strange light upon the whole of the pool beneath it. The shimmering wall of water cascaded down back into the pool, disappearing without even a splash. I glanced across the reddish stone and above the reddish waters, staring at the figure that now looked upon me. Its voice was but a whisper and I could scarcely tell if it was even speaking at all. "Greetings, traveler. Long have I waited for you to come."

I shook my head, confused, bewildered at the ghost's sudden appearance. "What? What do you mean?" *Waited for me? But... you*

died so long ago... how could you have known...?

His raspy whisper issued forth yet again and I could not be certain that it was anything more than a figment of my imagination. "The signs, traveler. You read them, did you not? The Mural of Enlightenment, the Verses of the Wanderer, the objects you have assembled here today... all of these were signs I left for you. And they were also signs for me... so that I would know you when you came..."

Is this what Simeon meant when he said Pelojian was a diviner? But I'm a technologist... how could he possibly foresee...? "So you knew? All this time you've just been waiting for me?" I could scarcely believe what I was hearing.

"Yes, traveler. I was blessed with the gift of seeing the future, and I knew that someday I would be needed to provide you with answers. So I am here, and you are here. Ask, and I shall answer as best I can..."

I suppose that's not so bad after all... at least he's a lot more straightforward than the damned Silver Lady. "Actually, I did have a few questions.... I suppose the most important one being, where are the Vendigroth Ruins?"

His haunting husk of a voice crept forth again, "The Vendigroth Ruins? That's very easy, traveler." He gestured towards my purse and I pulled my map out, watching him point to a location about three days to the southeast. "A place of sorrow. A place of death."

I was almost stuttering, the specter easily intimidating me with his raspy words. "What can you tell me about them?" *It's going to be all right... I was told to ask questions, and ask them I shall.*

Pelojian hovered silently above the pool for several moments before answering. "Vendigroth was an amazing place, traveler. There are wonders now, here in your time... but I tell you, Vendigroth was a city of marvels and wonders. This thing you call technology... the people of Vendigroth mastered it long before the dwarves. I can't even begin to describe the things they created..."

I shook my head, sadly, "But then Arronax became angry with them.

He feared technology..." *If only Arronax had been like Pelojian... willing to tolerate and accept mutual existence...*

The specter nodded its ghastly head slowly, a particularly grim and chilling gesture, "Yes, and he annihilated them because of it. Tread carefully in the ruins of old Vendigroth, traveler. The blood of its people still screams for retribution, for revenge. It is an evil place, twisted by pain and fury. Your journey there will not be an easy one..."

If it's all the same to you, I'd prefer to not think about it... that'll just make me want to turn right back around and head in the opposite direction.

"Could you tell me about the Vendigroth Device?"

"It was a device they created to destroy him. And destroy him it would have, traveler. If a machine can be thought of as evil, then this Vendigroth device would be called such."

I had come to quite the similar conclusion previously. Surely a mage would have an even more vehement opinion, however. "What does it do, exactly?" I shuddered, remembering Nasrudin's explanation of it, but I needed to learn everything I could before fully committing to my own banishment. I still hadn't decided for certain if I could really go through with it.

Pelojian was pensive yet again, not easily being able to put his near limitless knowledge into a form that I could readily understand. I, at least, appreciated the effort... being cryptic about things helped nobody. "Put very simply, it severs a soul from this world forever. A person killed with this device can never return to the lands of the living. It is the true and final death... the last step in the dark journey..."

Gods, how many different ways can you keep saying the same, horrible thing? "Uh, right..." I needed to change the subject so he would stop talking about how godawful that damned device was. "I'm confused. What role do I play in all of this?"

"Your role is a strange one, traveler. On one hand, you might say that you are merely Fate's puppet. But if you look at it another way, it's you, and only you, that has any choice. It is everyone else who dances to the strings. In the end, how you see things is your decision, and your decision only..."

So I'm either the only one without a damned choice in the world, or the only one with one? Those are somewhat exclusive to each other, good fellow. "An interesting viewpoint." I was trying to be tactful. I wasn't very well going to tell an ages old shade that had been waiting for me since his human death that I thought he was full of it.

I thought about what to ask next for several moments. It seemed like all of my questions had been answered, though there was one last thing I simply had to try. "If you can see the future, how does all of this end...?"

Pelojian laughs.

"I knew you were going to ask that. Did you really expect an answer?"

His laugh was a horrible noise, like a thousand voices all screaming out my name, and I shuddered uncontrollably as it came out of his mouth. Even after he stopped I couldn't stop shaking. I could still hear the voices, sometimes distinct and sometimes overlapping each other, still calling out to me.

Why would I have really expected him to give me any other answer anyway? "I suppose not. Well, I think that's all. Thank you, Pelojian, for answering my questions. I will be off to the ruins of Vendigroth, then." No matter how badly I tried to tune it out, I couldn't help but still hear those damned voices.

The ghost hovering in front of me nodded slowly, yet peacefully, "Yes, I must go as well. My long vigil is over, and I can finally go to my rest. Fate has not yet chosen, and Death himself awaits. Farewell, traveler..." Even as the final words exited his mouth, he slowly sank back into the pool. His body became enveloped in a bright, white light, yet the water beneath him remained stained red. Slowly he sank beneath the surface and, with one final flash of light, he disappeared.

I stared into the placid waters nervously, watching the red slowly fade to clear. Still, in the background, I could hear the voices calling out to me... calling out my name. I felt a tightness in my chest and stopped suddenly, holding a hand over it as if it would somehow make it go away.

A bright light shone forth from the pool, reddish-orange in color, and I collapsed onto my knees, staring at it. "Samantha!" I heard Virgil shouting, joining the chorus of voices all calling out to me. *What's happening to me? What is this feeling, this light?* The light grew brighter and brighter, yet I could no longer even turn my head away from it. I squinted against it reflexively, shielding my eyes from its intense radiance. My eyes began to ache, such was the force of that unbearably bright light. I could feel Virgil's plated hands on my shoulders, and he shook me worriedly, "Samantha! Snap out of it!"

I tried to answer, but I could not speak... could not move. The ache in my eyes was too much and I slammed them shut, still unable to simply turn away. The voices in my head grew clearer and clearer, and they were those of my friends. Sebastian, Vollinger, Franklin... and still the voice of Virgil, calling out to me, "Samantha! Samantha, say something!" I took a deep breath and my eyes snapped open rather suddenly, but I immediately squinted against the bright light, though something seemed different about it now. It was no longer clouded by the waters beneath the pool, even though it still had that same, reddish-orange hue.

I slowly became aware of the fact that I was lying on my back, my head resting against something solid and cold. Virgil's head ducked in front of my face and he stared into my eyes with worry, blocking out the blindingly bright evening sun from my sight. "Samantha! What's come over you? Are you alright?!"

The feeling was slowly returning to my arms and my legs, and I continued focusing on breathing. I pushed away from the ground, sitting up, slowly looking around to take in my surroundings. It was definitely daytime once again, though the sun was already setting. I could only conclude I must have fallen unconscious after Pelojian disappeared. My head hurt terribly, but I had been resting it against the stone walls of the pool so that only made sense. I looked over towards Virgil again, rubbing my head as I tried to find the words to respond to him, "I think... I'm fine, Virgil... thank you for asking. How long was I asleep?"

Sebastian snorted, "Well, I guess that depends on what you call

'sleep'." I gave him a rather perplexed look and grasped onto Virgil's hand, accepting his help in pulling me up to my feet.



Vollinger pulled out his pocket watch and studied it carefully for several moments. "I would say you first started exhibiting signs of strange behavior right around three and a half hours ago. You quite suddenly dashed out of the library without a word and you've been darting around the entire city of Tulla since. Further, we could all hear you muttering about magickal colleges and reciting strange poetry without responding to a single one of us. At last you seemed to have a rather odd conversation with the fountain here and then you simply... fell."

Magickal colleges and poetry...? But that was the puzzle... the mural of enlightenment! "No, no... you misunderstand... I was just activating the symbols on the ground, and reading the books... it all lead me to Pelojian. Don't tell me none of you saw him...? He appeared above the pool right around midnight, just like Simeon said he would!"

Franklin cleared his throat purposefully, "I do hate to be the bearer of bad news, but we've only been in Tulla since this morning. The sun's only set halfway, so you couldn't possibly have visited anybody in Tulla at midnight! If I didn't know any better I would say you're as crazy as a loon!"

Thanks for the vote of confidence, Franklin. I looked around at the others but they only nodded at me, slowly and worriedly, in response. *Damnation! I know what I saw! That was NOT a dream!* "I do think this place is having a rather unfortunate effect on me, then. Must be all of that magick about, not agreeing with my temperament."

Virgil patted me on the shoulder gently, "Yes, that must be it. Let's get out of here for awhile."

I grinned at him, "I've got just the place in mind... if you all wouldn't mind following a crazy woman for just awhile longer."

Chapter the Sixty Sixth: The City That Bore the Wrath of an Evil Most Ancient

Although I was given plenty of strange looks by my companions on our way out of Tulla, after only a day's travel they had all but forgotten my 'odd behavior' before we left. I was all too happy to let them forget about it, too. I didn't very much like the idea that I'd just dreamed up an encounter with an ancient, omniscient ghost that had been waiting for me since his death. I shuddered a bit as I thought of it.

The wastes seemed to grow abnormally flat as we neared the location I had fixed in my mind. Even from half a day's journey away I could see the massive heaps of metal on the horizon and I knew that Pelojian hadn't lead me wrong, dream or no. The scars of the land were unnerving to say the least, especially considering they'd been made over two thousand years prior. *If Arronax can do THIS... how am I possibly supposed to stand up to him?* I glanced at my shield hesitantly, inwardly cringing at the thought of trying to deflect such a far-reaching attack with my rudimentary device. *No, if Vendigroth couldn't stop it... there's no way that I could. I just have to hope he's afraid of the device... I must get my hands on the device.*

"Are you all right, Samantha?" Virgil placed his hand comfortingly on my shoulder. "Do you want to take a rest for awhile?"

I shook my head and patted his hand gently, "No, that's all right. I'm fine, really. I was just thinking about Arronax is all."

Vollinger aimed his rifle off into the distance and fired it, and I could even see it hit something just at the bare edge of my sight. "Let us worry about him when the time comes, Samantha. Our attention is

needed in the present." I saw a herd of spiders stalking outward towards us and realized that he was quite right.

Franklin's and Sebastian's guns rang out shortly after Vollinger's, taking two more spiders along with them. I wasn't one to simply wait around for them to protect me, however. I dashed forward, axe in hand, meeting the spiders amidst a copse of dead trees. They skittered about menacingly, trying in vain to strike at my legs. Even in my clumsy old dress I was still too fast for them.

A volley of bullets went whizzing past me, tearing apart two more of the horrible spiders. I brought my axe down on the few that remained, chopping off several of their spindly little limbs with each strike. It only took a few strikes before the spiders surrounding me stopped moving completely. I glanced at Vollinger with a wink, "So I was saying about Arronax..."

He merely chuckled, shaking his head and wiping off the barrel of his rifle with his handkerchief. "I do believe that discussion can at least wait until we've recovered the Vendigroth device, can it not? We've got ruins to explore."

I glanced around more thoroughly, noticing the massive structure of metal not too far from where I was already standing. "Hm. I suppose you're right." He winked at me, then saw to carefully reloading his rifle. I wandered off towards the strange building, careful to avoid stepping in any of the half a dozen holes that littered the ground in front of it.

Just as I neared one, however, a small family of spiders burst out from it violently. I very nearly screamed, but luckily the scream caught in my throat and I avoided making a damned fool of myself. The glowing, green orbs that launched forth from Sebastian's gun took out two of the bastard spiders before I could even get my bearings.

Hmph. Scare ME, will you? I swatted several more spiders with my axe and kept doing so until, once again, no more spiders remained. Carefully, then, I crept towards the next nearest hole, axe in hand, waiting to see if each of the damned things was a den of horror. Once

more, spiders burst forth, only this time I was ready for them. I wasn't the only one, either.

A burst of gunfire tore through the lot of them the very instant they even dared show their ugly little faces. The single spider that remained did so for only a fraction of a second before my axe split it quite literally in two. *I'll teach you buggers to try and ambush me.*

Carefully and systematically we continued to eliminate the spiders infesting the remainder of the holes in the ground. Such a heavily and disgustingly guarded entryway didn't bode well for the rest of Vendigroth, but at last I'd cleared the way in. With a heavy sigh I ducked inside of the massive, metal structure and slowly descended the staircase. Each of my footsteps made a hollow, metallic noise as I wound further and further down, the noise echoing off of the ridged, metal walls that ringed the mostly empty chamber. The six of us made quite the racket, and I was sure anything that still lived in this horrible place would now be aware of our presence.

As I set my foot on the dusty, stone floor at the bottom of the staircase I realized that I was standing on what could only be considered a street. Its name was lost to time, the people who walked it all victims of tragedy, yet still the street stood... unmaintained, dusty and dirty in its age, yet as solid as it ever was. *Simply amazing... they truly built an underground city, here...*

The structure that had been painstakingly carved out underground was a strange mix between an open city like Tarant and an underground, cavernous network of rooms like the Wheel Clan. It was like nothing I'd ever seen before and I walked among it near constantly in awe. Despite its age and abandonment, and near guarantee of infestation by horrible monsters, I felt somehow welcome in its halls. Instead of itching or burning my skin felt soothed and calm, and a feeling deep within my heart urged me to explore further.

I entered a room off to the side of the main road and rummaged around in a heavily stylized wooden chest, decorated lavishly with brass plating and intricately carved into a unique shape. I found several healing salves, obviously old and suffering from reduced

potence due to age and neglect. I tried one of them out on a particularly nasty wound I'd received from the spiders, and surprisingly it seemed every bit as effective as one of my normal salves. *To think it's decayed so much, and yet still it's every bit as good as what we can make today...*

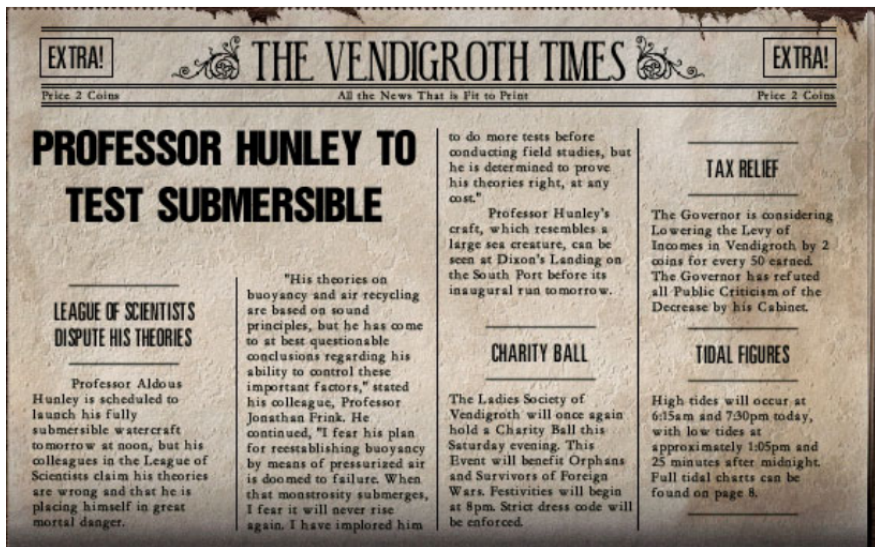
Not wanting to dwell in one place for too long, I shuffled out of the room and explored on the other side of the main road. It seemed to be much wider, almost like an underground park or cafeteria dining room. There were dusty and rotted wooden chairs and tables scattered about. I could almost see the ancient citizens of this grand, underground city, sharing the day's news with each other over a simple cup of tea. I longed to be with them, exchanging the local gossip and marveling in the latest scientific discoveries.

I was shaken from my reverie by the door on the far end of the chamber bursting open quite suddenly. I saw a thick, greenish stalk protrude from the doorway and soon it was followed by another. Then I saw it, a massive spider creature with the upper half of a woman being carried through the door on her spindly little legs. I'd seen creatures like her before, but none even nearly so large... so menacing.

Even as she drew forth a crude bow and began firing arrows at me, each one deflected by the field generated by my chapeau before it could do more than scratch me, a handful of tinier spider creatures skittered beneath her legs and hissed at me violently. Franklin gasped in both horror and delight at the same time, "Good God, you're smellier than a bog howler and twice as ugly!" He raised Old Mary up to eye level, carefully aiming and landing a solid shot into the creature's abdomen. It howled a high unearthly screech before shifting its aim and sinking an arrow into Franklin's chain armor.

I shouted at it angrily as I dashed forward with my axe, "Awfully bold for a spider bitch, aren't you? Don't you know you're firing arrows at the great FRANKLIN PAYNE?!" My axe cleaved one of its limbs off in a single strike and a mere two strokes later the creature was slumping to the ground in a sickly pool of greenish white goo. I could hear Terry snarling viciously at my feet as he tore the smaller spiderlings into disgusting little chunks. *Ugh... good... good dog...?*

Sebastian chuckled darkly, "Now that's my kinda dog! You get 'em, Terry!" *He does have a point.* I cautiously stepped around the nauseating muck that now coated the nearby floor and walls, exploring into the room beyond. The chamber was wide, for an underground room anyway, but ultimately it dead-ended in what appeared to be a bedroom. The mattress had long rotted off of the sturdy, metal frame of the bed, but it was still a particularly recognizable sight. There was even a tattered and decayed newspaper laying about on the nightstand. I glanced over it curiously, afraid to touch it lest it crumble before I could even read a word.



By god, such an amazing machine they're describing...! ...and there, on the right, they've got such detailed information about the tides! I didn't even know it was possible to foretell such things! Even as I stood above the paper, gawking at it like a slack-jawed simpleton, Vollinger wandered up to me and handed me a rather brittle piece of paper. "I found this sitting on top of a desk over there. It seems like something you might be interested in."

"Thank you, Vollinger," I said, stunned, glancing over the paper he handed to me in awe. It was a schematic of some kind, for a machine the Vendigrothians deemed a 'Vivifier'. *...regenerative capabilities beyond even the most... all physical and mental characteristics... subjects were faster, stronger, smarter and more...* "Gods, Vollinger, do you know what this is?! This is a chemical of some kind... it's a wonder drug! The subjects that took this improved in every conceivable way... and the effect didn't wear off! THIS IS AMAZING!"

"Now, now," Franklin chided, "Let's not get carried away, shall we? There are bound to be plenty of unexplained scientific wonders the farther we delve into this spectacular hellhole!" Of course, he was correct. As wonderful as the vivifier was, I was bound to find even more schematics like it, or even better than it, if only I continued onward. I backtracked towards the main road and headed down it until coming to an intersection. It didn't look to lead terribly far down to the left, so instead I went right.

The six of us battled our way furiously through an ever increasing amount of spider creatures, though as of yet there were none more horrifying than that first one. We picked our way through broken windows and rotted doorways, slowly making our way towards a thick, metal grate that loomed on the opposite wall. Eventually we did reach it and I slid it aside, stepping through into the area beyond. I found myself in a small room, not unlike the chambers I'd battled through to reach the grate in the first place, and from just outside the door I heard the solid 'clack clack' of even more spider creatures.

I burst out of the fragile doorway, my axe swinging even before I could see the bastards in front of me. With my ears as my guide I struck a solid blow clear through the spider creature's chest, and it collapsed to the ground with a horrific shriek. Franklin congratulated me quite jovially on my expertise. There was no time to dawdle, and I lurched around the corner with incredible speed to strike at the next creature. It, too, went down in a similar fashion. No matter how horrible the beasts were I could still manage to best them. It only aided my confidence that I had men like Franklin Payne backing me up should I stumble.

My eyes searched the walls and passages carefully as I wandered through several more rooms, each one more rough and cavernous than the last. It seemed like I was now traveling through a much more experimental area of the city. Perhaps it had been carved out as housing for the poor, or using substandard machines. There was still yet another possibility that it was never meant for inhabitation at all, but instead it served as an underground channel for water. Surely the Vendigrothians had the same needs as any other beings on Arcanum, whatever race they might've been. Naturally, I thought of them as human, but I supposed that was every bit as silly as assuming they'd been elves.

I picked up a rather ancient rifle as I continued forward, of a make I very clearly did not recognize. *Of course I don't recognize it... I'm not exactly the world's foremost expert on Vendigrothian technology. Actually, perhaps I am now... and if I'm not, I'd bet I soon will be.* I picked through various rotted chests and bits of scattered wreckage, scouring for any parts I could find. Even the junk in such an incredible place was now a priceless artifact, lost to time... and evil.

Lying in one chest I found a single, pristine bottle amidst a heap of useless junk, brittle and broken beyond repair. It looked as though it was brand new, and I was immediately impressed by whatever material could avoid the widespread destruction that had befallen Vendigroth and then withstand the rigors of age besides. I placed the bottle in my purse, intending on examining its contents closely at a later date. *There are always more wonders to behold.*

A shocked gasp escaped my mouth as I cracked open yet another rotted chest and gazed upon the strange part that sat inside. "What the hell is THAT doing here? By the Gods... no... what was it doing on the Isle of Despair...?"

Sebastian clapped me on the shoulder rudely, "What are you going on about, anyway? You look like you saw a ghost." I grabbed the chassis out from the chest and held it up next to his gun purposefully. He gave me an odd look before staring down at it, then looking back up at me with a wholly more shocked look on his face. "What the hell is going on here? Are you trying to tell me that the gun you gave me came from Vendigroth?!"

"I'm not sure," I said quite uncharacteristically honestly. "I made your gun using a rather old looking schematic and a strange part I found on the Isle of Despair... Gods, those were both found amidst strange technological wreckage... it must've been some kind of machinery from Vendigroth..."

As much as I wanted to dwell on that thought, my attention was diverted by yet another spider malevolently creeping around the corner. Almost as quickly as it had showed itself it had been splattered against the nearby wall by a hail of gunfire, but I was getting a better feeling for this place... and I knew it wouldn't be alone.

I could see its friend as soon as I rounded the corner, its limbs wreathed in magickal fire. *Bloody hell... I hate fire.* I charged forward with my axe, turning at just the last moment to deflect its flaming leg with my shield. The fire on that leg went out as it contacted the electrodes I'd wired to the front of the shield and I grinned at the creature wickedly.

Loosening the grip on my axe for just a moment I focused on pummeling the spider with my shield. It hissed at me violently between each strike, but I refused to be afraid of it. I batted it relentlessly, over and over again, snuffing out the magickal flames with ease. When the last of its limbs were put out I squeezed the handle of my axe firmly and struck out at the spider. It tried to run, but of all things it was actually dizzy from being slapped around by my shield. I put it out of its misery quickly.

Soon enough I came to what appeared to be another main road, although this one was different from the last. I followed it off to one end, although it seemed to cut off rather abruptly where I would've expected it to continue. Backtracking, I made my way to the opposite end of it and found a solid, metal door leading into another network of rooms. Sitting out on top of one of the tables in the first room was another paper.

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PROF. HUNLEY MISSING, PRESUMED DEAD!

EXPERIMENTAL SUBMERSIBLE FAILS TO RETURN

Professor Aldous Hunley of the League of Scientists has been listed as missing and presumed dead after his experimental craft failed to return to port at its previously scheduled time.

"This is a sad day for all science," commented his

sometime adversary on the council, Professor Jonathan Frink. "We may have disagreed on quite a few matters, but we respected each other's opinions. He will be missed."

Professor Hunley launched his experimental submersible some seven days past, and was scheduled to return two days ago. Professor Frink predicted this as a likely outcome, and tried to dissuade Hunley from proceeding with the test, to

no avail. "I imagine my colleague is resting somewhere on the ocean floor, about now," he was heard to say as he walked away from the press conference where Hunley's disappearance was made public.

UNIVERSITY SEEKS REPLACEMENT

The Engineering School of the University of Vendigroth is looking for a replacement for Professor Hunley, who is now presumed dead. All qualified applicants are requested to apply in person.

PROHIBITION

The spectre of Prohibition has risen once again, as the Governor considers a Bill to ban the sales of Spirits in the confines of the City proper. Supporters of the Bill cite increased Crime and Work Absenteeism figures as the principle Show of Cause for the bill, while its Critics cite similar Statistics during the last Prohibition era over 30 years ago.

WEATHER

The Weather Ministry of Vendigroth is Predicting

Of course, the submersible... that's what that wreckage must have been. Gods, how long had it truly been there while still being in such amazing condition? ...and the spiders! It was guarded by spiders! It all makes so much SENSE now! These beasts must have infested Vendigroth even then. I remembered fondly how I first found that wreckage on Shades Beach on the Isle of Despair. I'd seen the name Vendigroth on a schematic at the time, but wrote it off as just some legend or

superstition. Little did I know at the time that most legends were true, and superstition was far from paranoid. I'd come a long way since then.

I battled my way furiously through more and more horrible spider creatures, descending further into the ruins of ancient Vendigroth as I navigated another labyrinth of nonsensical rooms. I was sure they'd served some kind of purpose at one point in time, they'd had some reasoning behind their organization. Such knowledge was now lost to time, and defiled by the presence of the horrible, mutant spiders. *Hmph. Where's Albert when I need him?* I chuckled darkly at that thought.

It seemed like the spiders this deep into the ruins had begun using poisoned arrows against me, much to my dismay. Even though the arrows were entirely less lethal thanks to my chapeau, if they were poisoned than even the minor scratches I suffered could complicate things rather quickly. I made liberal use of the antidote powder I had left, praying that I wouldn't encounter too many more of those particular creatures.

After battling through what seemed like well over a dozen of the bastards I finally came across a second grate. I climbed through it in a similar manner as I had the last one and spied a third paper on the ground. I was fascinated to read the news from this ancient place, looking at it as a window into the heart of the lost people.



Bloody Arronax... what was he thinking...? Oh, how the world would be such a different place today... Vendigroth and Tulla existing side-by-side... no, I dare not even dream of such an idealistic world... if it wasn't Arronax it would've been something else. I sighed longingly, slowly growing more and more unsatisfied with the cruel world I lived in. That such wonders could be so carelessly destroyed... that dear husbands, all but forgotten, could be beaten to death by careless

children. Anger rose up inside of me and I pressed forward with hatred in my heart.

Dozens more spider creatures stood in my way, but I refused to back down. Guilt and regret fueled my rage, and my rage fueled my axe. I deflected arrows with my shield and with my axe, storming forward to chop apart anything and everything in my way. It was good that I saw fit to become enraged over what I saw there, for if it weren't for that I may have eventually succumbed to the pain that overtook me.

My wounds grew severe as I chopped apart spider after spider, many of them horrifying mutants. Despite how commonplace the bizarre mutations were in this city, many more spiders were normal, but just too damned aggressive for their own good. Sometimes my wounds burned with magick, other times with poison. The one certain thing was each time I would pause, even for just a second, a burning feeling followed shortly afterwards. My companions followed me as best they could, but I pressed onward quickly and stubbornly... at times they could barely keep up at all.

I chopped apart another mutant spider standing in the way of a third grate and climbed through the grate unhesitantly. What was once a grand, underground city was reduced to a nigh interminable network of infested hallways. As much as I delighted in the marvels I could find within, I also looked forward to retrieving what I'd come for and getting the hell out.

After chopping apart a few more spiders, the rage inside of me finally ceased, as I no longer had the energy to continue fighting on. "Gods... how much longer can this place really be? I'm sure it was incredible at one point, but now... this is a special hellhole that rivals the Bangellian Deeps!"

Franklin chuckled satisfactorily, "Isn't it fantastic?! I'm so glad I decided to accompany you on this fool's errand! It has been most enjoyable!"

I snorted at him, "So you think it a fool's errand, do you? You don't believe the Vendigroth Device actually exists, even after all the technology we've uncovered here?"

"Quite the opposite!" His confidence was somewhat unnerving, "I'm confident we will retrieve the device. After all, you've got the great FRANKLIN PAYNE helping you out! What worries ME is that Arronax fellow. I may be a seasoned adventurer, but I'm not so sure if even I can give a mage like that a run for his money!"

I shook my head, picking up a schematic I noticed lying on a nearby table, "We'll cross that bridge when we get to it, I suppose. One step at a time, eh?"

"Surely! Say... what's that you have there in your hands?" He peered over my shoulder nosily, though it was hardly the first time.

I sighed, reading the schematic as quickly as I could. It was far from my area of expertise, but I was accustomed to dealing with schematics well above my level of understanding. "It looks to be a design for some rather superior quality war gauntlets... brass knuckles taken to a rather gruesome technological extreme. These parts don't exist, though... if we want to try making these, we'll have to scavenge around for parts. Keep your eyes peeled, would you?"

"Absolutely!" Franklin cheered as happily as ever. "If those parts are to be found, then FRANKLIN PAYNE will find them! We'll be making those gauntlets in no time flat!"

For all of its bluster, Franklin's confidence did inspire more of the same. I was happy for that, at least. Vollinger tapped me gently on the elbow and I looked down at him. "I'll keep my eyes peeled, too. Not much gets past me."

Now that I can believe. "Thanks, Vollinger." In the time it took me to hear and then answer Vollinger, Franklin had already run ahead. Judging by his boisterous shouting from not far down the hall, he'd found something horrifying. I readied my axe and wandered forward to find out exactly what.

There were no less than four of the most horrifying spider creatures in the massive room that the hall let out into. I was still quite wounded from my previous encounters with the bastards and didn't

really feel up to fighting against four of them simultaneously. What I did and didn't feel like doing mattered little, however, for they most certainly wanted to pick a fight with me. Their bows fired almost in unison, four arrows poking the skin on my neck like needles before dropping to the ground with a quiet ting.

Old Mary fired issued forth a startlingly loud bang and the first of the spider creatures shrieked in pain, a sickly goo spilling out onto the stony floor beneath. I charged the other nearby creature, content to let the group of skilled gunners I had backing me up take care of the one Franklin had started on.

As I neared, the creature swung a thick, chitinous leg at me, but I chopped the bloody thing off almost as soon as it was in the air. I raised up my shield to protect me from the nauseating goo that spilled forth and chopped off the creature's arm next, not liking one bit the idea of it firing its bow at such a close range. Its shrieks were almost unbearable.

It tried to strike me with another of its legs, but I parried it and quickly countered, slicing deeply into the creature's abdomen. My shield was no longer of any use in protecting me from the snot-like substance that leaked out of the spider creature in copious amounts. I gagged even as I continued fighting. With one final strike, I neatly severed the creature's head, putting an end to the horrible shrieks it let forth, and allowing me the break I needed to quietly spit up the morning's breakfast against the nearby wall. I desperately hoped for a good rain on the journey back to Tulla.

After only a moment to catch my breath, I charged even further into the expansive room in front of me. It was dark, but I didn't need to see when guided by the sound of the spider creatures' hateful cries. Terry darted forward, the only one of my companions that could actually outrun me if he tried, and the strangled shrieks that followed his disappearance suggested he'd found the third spider creature and was taking care of it most brutally. *Now I surely pray for rain... Gods, I hope that horrible substance doesn't stain. I like Terry's color the way it is.*

Another arrow sailed forth, scratching the very edge of my cheek before being deflected harmlessly. I was getting quite tired of the

bastard spider creatures endlessly firing arrows at me. The last remaining creature was in front of me faster than even I expected, staring at me with the same horror that I stared at it. In a fit of desperation it threw its bow at me, but I chopped it into two pieces with my axe.

Unnerved, it turned and tried to skitter away from me. *Never turn your back to me... never.* My axe had split apart its spidery abdomen almost before it took its first step in the opposite direction. Less than three steps later its rearmost two legs were lying on the ground to either side of it and the pain was too much for it to continue. I leapt on top of its back, no longer caring just how much of the horrid goo I got all over myself, and my last strike cut quite cleanly through the creature's head and all the way down to its front legs.

I paused for only a moment to catch my breath when Terry came running up, covered in what I only wished were a disgusting amount of snot, carrying a sheet of paper gently in his mouth. He set it down in front of me and backed away before shaking a good amount of the substance all over the nearby floor and walls. Reaching down carefully, I brushed bits of the substance off of the piece of paper before picking it up. It looked to be another schematic.

Gods, I even have the parts to make this... ! "Vollinger, I think we're going to need to spend a bit of time in Tarant when we're done here. I could use your expertise in gunsmithy."

He looked up at me with his eyebrow raised curiously. If anything he looked rather pleased, "Is that a fact? I look forward to seeing what we shall create together."

I fixed the schematic to my journal, stuffing it back into my purse to keep it safely out of harm's way. A gun like that would be quite immensely useful when it came time to fight Arronax, and I needed all the help I could get.

Nearby there was yet another strange grate, leading to another section or floor of the endless city. I couldn't even tell anymore if I was going up, down, or sideways, such was the bizarre construction

of the grated passages. When I finally reached the other side my mouth dropped open in shock. *HERE?! Of all the bloody places to find it, it's HERE?! I nervously read the plaque in front of me.*

"I've finally found it," I said aloud, to nobody in particular, "After my long pilgrimage, I'm finally at the end... I've found Velorien." My voice was slow and stunned as I slowly crept up the staircase onto the altar.

"Well, it's about damned time!" Sebastian grinned. "You've been going on to various altars as long as I've known you, and that's not a short time!" Terry started barking in my direction furiously and growling a low, hateful growl. Sebastian looked at him oddly, "What the hell's gotten into you now? Ease up, killer." He tossed Terry a piece of jerky, but for the first time possibly ever, Terry ignored it.

Franklin looked on at the altar in his usual, fascinated method. "Such fantastic construction! Only the ancients of Vendigroth could have built a splendid altar like this one!" *Of course they built it. We're in Vendigroth, after all.* "Velorien, I recognize that name... is he not the father of all the pagan gods? It is only fitting his altar would be in such a magnificent place! What a fantastic story this will make!" Franklin always did think of his stories.

I heard Vollinger's ever-quiet voice cautioning me even as I took the final steps towards the top of the staircase, "Do be sure you know what you're doing, Samantha. I'm not sure I like the way this plaque reads."

Virgil's stuttering voice followed suit, as unsure as he ever was, "Y-yes, I think Vollinger might have a point. W-why don't we back off for awhile and t-think about this? I'd hate to be too hasty when dealing with ancient and vengeful gods. I mean... what if you did something wrong? W-we should be sure... is all I'm saying."

"Nonsense, Virgil." I chided him, "I've done everything correctly. I haven't missed a single of the altars in Professor Buxington's book, and I don't see how Mazzerin's Mystery could lead to any other solution." I paused for just a moment, taking in the splendor of the altar from the top of the staircase.

Of course, Virgil wasn't hearing any of it. "B-but what if the professor missed one? Even he can't know everything about such an ancient religion. I just... just be careful, okay?"

I scoffed, taking a step onto the altar as I answered, "I AM being careful, Virgil."

That's when I died.

Chapter the Sixty Seventh: Not Even In Death

"Samantha..." I could hear my name being whispered into my ear softly, calmly. No, everything was silent, I didn't hear a thing. I could somehow feel it, feel an intense urging... somebody trying to get my attention. It was only in my mind that the urging became a whisper, for it was in that way that I understood it best. There wasn't any other way to describe it, but I knew that no words were actually being spoken. *Samantha...*

I opened my eyes and my heart caught in my chest. *Frederick...?* I saw him in front of me, smiling gently. A tear rolled down my cheek, slipping off of my chin and landing silently in the grass. *I've waited for so long... is it really you?* We were standing in the park, in the very same spot we'd stood on that day. I couldn't tell if I was truly standing face to face with Frederick or simply reliving my memories even after my own death.

I remembered that day so vividly... it was only 6 months after Frederick had released me from prison, and I was still trying to act as defiantly as I could. It had been warm inside the house, so Frederick invited me out with him. I was defiant, but not stupid, so I took him up on his offer... it was certainly better than staying inside.

He walked me to the park with him, holding my hand gently but firmly. That was just the way of things... he knew if he let go for even a moment that I would run off. I made a great big show of it every time he left me alone, how I wouldn't be there when he got back. Looking back on it, I'm surprised he ever put up with it. When we finally arrived in the park he simply sat there, holding my hands, staring at me while we stood next to the most beautiful tree. Then... he let go.

I stood there for several moments, stunned. I dropped my hands to my sides and simply stared at him, wondering just what he was doing. He smiled, that same, gentle smile still plastered on his face even now, and he just said, "You're free." He always did know exactly what to say, and when... I merely looked at him, feeling so lost in that moment. It was then that I realized, even if I had anywhere else to go, I truly wanted to stay with Frederick. I never threatened to run away again.

You're free...

Again, the sound of words, yet not... it was Frederick's voice, yet his lips didn't move. *This... isn't a memory, is it? Frederick, it's really you!* I jumped forward, tears bursting from my eyes, and I wrapped my arms around him solidly. If we'd been anywhere else I would've tackled him outright, but the rules of this place were different somehow. Everything seemed so calm, so much less immediate... as I imagined how he would feel when I held him, the warmth coming through that impeccable suit he always wore, it was so. There was no jump, no motion, he was just there... in my arms at long last. *I'm free? Yes... I suppose that I am... at last, we can be together again...*

I could see the tears in his eyes as well, yet still he had that smile. *I've missed you...*

Oh, Frederick, I've missed you, too... Words couldn't describe the immense joy I felt to be with him once again. It didn't matter that we were both dead, we were together at last. I breathed in deeply, though it felt like a silly thing to do without a body... Frederick started laughing at me and I smiled in return. *Why here?*

Frederick felt somehow happy, then... I couldn't explain how, but his feelings were my feelings... what we shared then was not mere words, but an aura of understanding that flowed from each of us to the other. *Your choice...* The meaning drifted across the wordless void between us.

Somehow, I knew exactly what he was trying to say. Although I continued to interpret his thoughts and feelings into words, they were a poor representation of the communication we now had. More

than just those two simple words, I understood that the park we stood in was a location of my choosing. We weren't bound by time or space... I could be anywhere I wanted to be with a mere thought. Frederick was happy that this one moment in my life had meant so much to me I would choose to relive it in death. *No... I don't need this place anymore... not if I have you. I've got so much I want to say, to you and to... Nathaniel...?*

As soon as the thought entered my mind the scenery shifted. I was reliving another moment of my life, but not one I ever wanted to live through a second time. *No, not this... anything but this. That's when it all went wrong, when the perfect life that I had shattered... and I failed to pick up the pieces...*

Frederick held my hands in his and squeezed gently, reassuringly. I could feel the pain in his heart, but also the desire... even despite the pain, all he wanted was to hold me close. *I forgive you...*

The tears came and wouldn't stop. *No, I don't deserve your forgiveness...* Even as I thought it, I knew it was pointless. I could feel his desire for me, and the sheer depth of his compassion. He held me so closely and I cried onto his shoulder. It felt like I'd been waiting so long to do that, but when we were alive I wouldn't allow myself such comfort. It was different now, there could be no secrets between Frederick and I. If I pulled away I knew it would only hurt him... if only I had known back then. *...but we can be together now... in death, we can comfort each other at last.... Frederick, take me to Nathaniel... I've missed him, too.*

Frederick's pain and sadness nearly overwhelmed me then. The depth of his emotions startled me, especially since in life I had never seen him so much as cry. He had no such limitations in death, and I felt his warm tears gently splashing down on my back even as he held me. *Gone...*

Without even another word, I suddenly knew everything. He had been waiting for me, too, he and Frederick both. He'd wanted to apologize to me, even as badly as I wanted to apologize to him. It wasn't to be, however. He got called back... days ago, years ago... time was irrelevant to the dead. Nathaniel was gone and he wouldn't be coming back. *No... not Nathaniel... why, out of all the souls of the*

dead, why Nathaniel...? Frederick, I am so sorry... if it weren't for me...
As my thoughts turned to Frederick the scenery changed yet again. I was standing next to Frederick's grave, remembering exactly how I felt when I first discovered his death. *If I hadn't been such a fool... if I hadn't run away...*

Although Frederick could not hide his pain from me, neither could he hide his sympathy. He held me so closely, then, and I sighed, closing my eyes as the tears ran down. I felt so warm and safe in his embrace, I never wanted him to let me go. *I forgive you...* It was the second time I felt his forgiveness, but this time I felt it so much more deeply.

It was more than mere forgiveness, but words didn't do his feelings justice. He didn't blame me for his own death any more than he blamed me for Nathaniel's... the only one who did blame me was myself, as it always had been. Frederick forgave me too easily, I couldn't just accept it as though that made everything better. I could've murdered a man and stored the body in Frederick's basement, and he just would've looked at me with those kind eyes of his and said, "I'll take care of it. The police won't suspect a thing." I longed to yield to that safety he offered me, but no matter how badly I wanted it I just couldn't allow myself to give in that easily.

I felt a cold breeze on my shoulders and chest, and I looked up at Frederick worriedly. He still held me close, yet I couldn't feel the warmth of his body anymore. A horrible sadness came over him, a longing like none I'd ever felt before. He felt distant and alone, worried and anxious all at the same time. *Live...*

The Caladon graveyard began to fade away as I grew to understand the meaning he shared with me. I was being brought back. So soon after I'd been reunited with Frederick, I was being torn away again. I tried screaming out to him, holding him even closer, but I could barely even feel him anymore. I couldn't ignore the feeling he was sharing with me in that moment, that feeling of intense loneliness. I was returning to the friends I'd made since I left Frederick, but without Nathaniel he had nobody else... once I was gone, he would be all alone again. *I'm so sorry, Frederick... I don't want to go, I want to be with you! I promise I'll bring Nathaniel back to you... I'll find him*

somehow and I'll set his spirit free...! Please, wait for me to return!

I breathed the stale underground air deeply into my lungs, coughing uncontrollably as my body came back to life once again. Everything seemed so loud all of the sudden, the hum of ancient machinery whirring with the slightest bit of life, the labored breathing of everybody gathered around me and waiting to watch me return, the skittering of spiders concealed in darkness just out of sight. Terry barked happily and I jumped, startled at the loud noise. My head began to ache terribly, and it felt as though I was waking up from a walking nightmare. *Frederick... I'm so, so sorry...* Tears poured out of my eyes beyond my control and I began to sob.

"There, you see?!" Franklin shouted enthusiastically, holding up an empty bottle of restorative. "Nothing to it!" He paused, looking down at me and realizing everything wasn't quite as well as he'd initially surmised. "Well, perhaps it's a bit more complicated than that..."

Virgil was sitting next to me, his face mere inches from mine, a pained expression on his face. At last he broke and placed his arms around me, squeezing me gently, "Gods, Samantha, I told you to be careful! You had me so worried!" He sighed even as he held me, "I-I'm sorry... are you alright? What's wrong?"

I shook my head, crying even harder as he held me. *Why? Why is everybody so nice to me? I don't deserve it.* Although it brought with it a horrible guilt, a feeling of comfort washed over me as I sat in Virgil's embrace. I couldn't tell if it was because of my fondness for him as a friend or if he just reminded me of Frederick in so many ways. Regardless, I still cried.

He held me silently for several moments before I finally calmed down, regaining my composure. *Sitting here and blubbering like a fool isn't going to solve a damned thing... I made a promise, and Frederick is counting on me. I have to take care of this Arronax business first, but I swear... I will find Nathaniel when this is over.* I breathed in deeply, coughing once again as I inhaled the dusty air. I dried my tears on a handkerchief and looked up at Virgil, "I'll be fine... I guess death just wasn't as kind to me as it was you."

A look of pain showed in his eyes, "I'll help you, Samantha... please, let me help you."

I shook my head, standing to my feet and pushing him away gently. I felt badly for doing so, but I had to be strong no matter how I felt. "Perhaps afterwards, Virgil. Destroying Arronax is far more important than any of my personal problems, you can't argue with that."

He only sighed, sadly, "Let's be on our way, then. I'm glad you're all right at least." *I'm sorry, Virgil... I just can't right now... I'm sure even Frederick understands...*

I sighed, stretching out my limbs and making sure I would be all right for travel again, despite my untimely death. When I really thought about it, I actually felt great. I was wide awake and not tired at all from the hours of battling through the underground caverns of Vendigroth, and I didn't have even a single scratch on me. I'd seen the schematics for restoratives before and I knew they weren't that potent, so it had to have been the blessing of Velorien. *Velorien takes all/And Velorien returns all.* I decided to keep that little secret to myself.

Slowly, I willed my feet to move. I had to continue onward regardless of the feelings stirring around inside of me. *I've come this far... it's almost finished. I'll get the device and then go to the final confrontation. If Arronax kills me, then I can go back to being with Frederick. If he doesn't, then I'll search out whatever bastard pulled Nathaniel's soul from the afterlife and make him sorely regret it.* That last thought more than anything was what kept me going.

At first I took only a few short steps, and then somewhat faster I began walking towards the far end of the cavern. I could hear Franklin's excited voice behind me, "Looks like we're off then! Not a moment too soon, either, I was just starting to get a bit drowsy!" *Thanks for the sympathy, old chap.* Reaching the doorway sitting in the opposite corner from the altar, I walked through it and into a long, wide hallway.

No sooner had I entered than I saw a two-legged machine charging at me rapidly from down the hallway. It was not unlike the machines I'd

fought in the caverns of the Iron Clan, although I suspected if I could find a more deadly machine than the ones in the Iron Clan it would be in Vendigroth. I pulled my axe off of my belt, holding it out in front of me firmly. *I don't bloody care how well you're built, you won't stand in my way.*

I whirled around like a tornado as the machine charged past me, deftly sidestepping its rapid flurry of strikes and bringing my axe quite severely against its back. The metal cracked beneath the force of my attack, and the crack spread throughout the whole of the machine in seconds. It whirred, attempting to turn around and continue fighting, but the metal bits that made up its legs began to crumble apart and it clattered to the ground uselessly. It merely sat there, spinning in place, completely helpless to do a damned thing. A single shot from Vollinger stopped it from moving forever.

The hallway stretched on for as far as the eye could see and I knew that I was getting close. In addition to the straight path there were also half a dozen side passageways, each of them containing several smaller rooms. Each side passage seemed to be guarded by another automaton, in addition to even more of the bastards continuing to charge from the far end of the main hall. Terry paced back and forth by the scrap left by the first automaton, whining pitifully. *It's all right, boy, you learned your lesson last time... Samantha will take care of these for you.* That's just what I did.

They attacked from nearly every way they possibly could, except for from behind. Virgil tried getting in their way and distracting them with his axe, but they seemed to be smarter than the others we'd faced... I'd have expected no less from Vendigroth. They knew Virgil's plate would've absorbed the majority of their strikes and instead turned their attention to Sebastian, Franklin, and myself.

Franklin didn't mind in the slightest. He kept firing at distant machines with Old Mary until she siezed up on him, then he charged in like a madman, wielding some kind of sword. I had no bloody clue where he found the damned thing, but he was Franklin Payne so I didn't really question it. He took a good beating from the machines he attacked most viciously, but his armor was second only to Virgil's, so he could certainly take what they dished out.

Sebastian kept his distance, continually firing off those strange green orbs from the gun I gave him. Unsurprisingly, the gun worked incredibly well against the automatons. They noticed it, too, as well they should have. They tried surrounding him and, when that failed, they tried disarming him. He kept on making strategic retreats, blowing apart automatons as soon as they could approach him and take a few swings.

Although the side passages were cluttered with almost as many automatons as the main passage, exploring them despite that paid off in spades. Whereas the rest of Vendigroth had been mostly destroyed and useless, it seemed like that might've been an artifact of the spider creatures. The automatons, for all that I despised them, protected this area well... and that meant the junk to be found was in primarily excellent condition. For each side passage I explored I found just enough of use to make me want to explore the next one, even after spying the three bastard machines guarding it.

One man's junk is another man's treasure. I picked up a particularly ancient sheet of metal, noting its use in one of the schematics I'd found. When I got back to a good workshop I would easily be able to fashion it into something quite useful, and that pleased me. "Well, what have we here?! Excellent timing!" *Gods, what has Franklin found now?*

I wandered over to the other side of the room and saw Franklin fiddling with a Vendigrothian rifle. "Hey! Stop that! Give that here!" I shouted at him, grabbing after the rifle. He was so surprised at my actions that he didn't even pose any resistance, and I snatched the rifle away right quick.

"I say, that was rather rude of you! If you needed a gun, you could've just asked." He actually did sound a touch hurt, as much as Franklin ever did anyhow. I felt a bit bad, but I couldn't have him going off and breaking such a useful piece of technology before I got the chance to fix it up.

"It's not that," I tried to explain, "I can combine that with my spare chassis, fix it up real good, and make it into something even better!"

You'd like that, wouldn't you? Come on, isn't it about time for Old Mary Mark 2?"

He grinned at me widely in response, "You're absolutely right! The old girl has served me so well, I think it's about time I retired her... I've got just the place on my wall to honor her years of dedicated service!" *Uhm, yes, do with that blasted thing what you will... I'm certainly tired of fixing it.*

We all continued onward down the main hallway, dispatching countless more automatons as we progressed. Certainly what they lacked in strength or durability they made up for in numbers, and they didn't lack a whole lot in the other categories in the first place. After a procession of them that seemed like it would absolutely never end, we finally came to a staircase spiraling upwards in a small room on the end of the hall.

This has to be it... the automatons could only be guarding the Vendigroth device... nothing else here warrants such vigilant protection. It may be Vendigroth, but that many machines had to be costly even for them. The hollow, metal stairs rang out as I climbed upward. Step, step, step... sweat formed on my brow as the anticipation grew. *What would such a device even look like? Will I know when I've found it?*

Even as I reached the top of the stairs I was assaulted by another pair of automatons. My goal was in sight, however, and nothing would stand in my way. On the far end of the room I could see it, a massive, green sphere suspended in a pool of cool, blue liquid. *Yes... yes I will know when I found it.* Simply being in the same room as the device filled me with a sense of purpose and confidence the likes of which I had never felt before.

I dodged to the side of the first automaton, but I wasn't fast enough... somehow it had managed to strike me solidly on the left shoulder and I dropped my shield reflexively. *Son of a bitch, this one can really hit...!* I growled underneath my breath and struck out at it violently. My axe burst into blue flames as it sailed through the air, striking the automaton so fiercely that it made my entire arm ache in pain. The automaton exploded violently on contact, the metal bits that fragmented and scattered across the floor glowing bright red with the

intense heat.

Holy hell... my axe has never done THAT before...! Sebastian took aim at the farther of the two automatons, his gun having a similar reaction to my axe. The green orbs that launched from it normally hung in the air slowly, almost floating towards their target lazily compared to how a normal bullet might fire. At the moment, however, that was not the case at all... those orbs fired across the length of the room with an incredible speed and the metal frame of the automaton bent and warped beneath their assault. By the time the automaton stopped moving it was a twisted wreck that couldn't have even walked let alone harmed anybody.

With the last of the dangers finally out of the way, I stepped forward and gazed at the orb-shaped device in awe. *This... everything any technologist might ever aspire to... the greatest achievement of science, and also the most evil... our last remaining hope for defeating Arronax.*

I wrapped up the orb carefully in the magickal robe I'd received from V'ed Eckes, doing my best to dampen the chilling effect it had on its surroundings. It certainly wouldn't be pretty if I tried dragging it into Tulla as it was, or worse... Tarant. Who knows how the local machinery would act if suddenly bolstered by several magnitudes above its original specifications? The whole city might go up in flames!

I gave the orb to Sebastian to carry, continuing the trend of giving him just about anything I didn't feel comfortable holding myself. As usual, he didn't mind in the slightest. I rather liked that about the fellow. He was willing to tolerate whatever I had in mind for him, and with a smile, too.

The way out of Vendigroth was wholly easier than the way in had been. I shook my head sadly at the massive number of crumbled piles of metal that I passed on the way out. *Gods, they really wanted to protect this thing, didn't they? I can't really blame them...* After passing by the defeated automatons and the altar to Velorien I still had several dozen mutant spider corpses to cautiously step around. I was still covered in the nauseating muck that issued forth from their wounds, now dried, but I certainly didn't care to get even more on

me. *Bloody hell, I really hope it rains.*



Contrary to my wishes, the wastes were as dreadfully barren as ever the whole way to Tulla. I was a bit nervous about how the Vendigroth device would take being transported through the magickal gate they had in place, but it seemed that as long as it was wrapped up in V'ed's robe it would be fine. Sebastian received more than a few odd looks from the students and teachers that wandered about the streets of Tulla and even the guardian beasts growled at him as he passed. *They can definitely feel it... even through the robe.*

I climbed the stairs at the far end of the main hall of mages and approached the door to Simeon's room carefully. Knocking gently, I headed inside and he looked up at me with disgust in his eyes. Although it was hardly polite of me, I couldn't help but grin. "I do believe you said I could have free use of your portals once I'd succeeded in my mission?"

He grumbled under his breath, "Please, make it quick. I do not wish to suffer the presence of the machine you carry with you any longer... it is a horrible thing." *Believe it or not, we agree.*

I gazed through the portals thoughtfully for only a moment before making my decision. *There's no faster way to get Cynthia that werewolf cure, and I just so happen to have landed my ship in Caladon anyway... I can always sail to Tarant to make my preparations after the fact.* I slipped through the portal to Caladon and the others followed closely behind.

Chapter the Sixty Eighth:

Preparation and Confrontation

Go Hand In Hand

The whole world seemed to shift nauseatingly as I stepped through that portal, and a rather sudden dizziness overcame me. I could feel and smell the fresh, sea air of Caladon and I breathed it in deeply, grabbing onto the hand rail alongside the bridge to steady myself while I got my bearings. *The sounds, sights, and smells... I'm home. No, this isn't my home anymore... my home is in the afterlife, with Frederick... pah, now I'm really being foolish... I've got to concentrate, the time for self-pity will come later.*

If I wanted to face Arronax so soon, I had to prepare, and the handful of schematics I'd found and parts I'd scavenged from Vendigroth were going to be quite useful in that regard. I needed only to get to a good workshop, and that meant going to Tarant. *But first, I made David a promise... and that's why I'm here.* The dizziness surrounding my head beginning to fade, I ran off towards the dirt road on the southern end of the bridge.

David's farm was in view, and it looked like his little rabbits had been recovering nicely. *So you kept your promise... and I kept mine.* The door hung open loosely as it always had and I nearly burst through it in my excitement. "David! I've found a cure for Cynthia! It was in Tulla, as you suspected." A look of shock washed over his face and I quickly pulled the bottle out of my purse, placing it carefully in his hand. "The ways of magick will never cease to amaze me! Here, Samantha Colburn. I have been saving, hoping that you would have something to help my Cynthia. Here is a thousand coin. I hope it will suffice as a reward."

He appears overjoyed.

"I will go give it to her at once! Goodbye and thank you again!"

I accepted his offer graciously. *Well, at least that covers the cost of the potion... and Cynthia is saved as well.* "It was a difficult journey. Thank you for the coin, it will help." I smiled at David and turned around, heading back outside to give him time with his daughter. I sighed, breathing in the fresh air once again.

Virgil took my hand in his and smiled at me, "You've really become a different person since I first met you. That was a good thing you just did. When they tell the story of how the renowned mediator and adventurer, Samantha Colburn, helped them out... that story will have a happy ending."

That's really too much. I felt flattered, but I didn't deserve his praise. "If I'd truly wanted to be charitable, I wouldn't have taken the coin he offered me." *Happy ending? No... stories don't have happy endings. Cynthia will have to live with having been a werewolf for the rest of her life.*

I could see the sadness behind Virgil's eyes, "That's not... no, nevermind." He let out a deep sigh of his own. "If you don't mind my saying so, you look horrible. Why don't I go rent a couple inn rooms so you can take a bath and Sebastian can clean Terry off in another one?"

Now that's a grand idea if I've ever heard one. "I would love that, Virgil, thank you. Vollinger, why don't you make sure that our ship is seaworthy and as soon as we're done getting cleaned up we'll make for Tarant? I've got to get to a workshop."

He acquiesced easily, "That sounds like a good plan. I cannot wait to find out what creations will spring forth from our collective minds." He did have such an interesting way of phrasing things.

I followed Virgil to the Mushroom Inn, taking the first room key he was offered and scurrying off to the bath. By the time I was done cleaning the dried, disgusting gunk off of myself, the water left in the tub looked like it came straight out of a sewer. I drained it and, just to be safe, bathed fully a second time. Anybody else would've done the same after taking a look at the water they just got out of. Besides, I did so love baths.

Terry was already squeaky clean by the time I finally emerged from my room, and he seemed quite happy about it in that puppy sort of way. By the time we arrived at the docks, Vollinger already had the ship ready to go. Once again, we were off to Tarant... a journey I'd made quite frequently and by quite a few different methods. Although I did so love to arrive by train, I would have to say my favorite method of travel was fast becoming travel by ship. Of course, there was the zeppelin, too, if anybody ever deigned to build another... but I sure as hell wouldn't fly on it even if they did.

Tarant loomed on the horizon not more than a week and a half after we left Caladon. I was eager to get right to work when we arrived and I headed straight back towards the factory areas of the city. Even as I neared it, however, I could see quite the ruckus going on outside one of the larger factories.

"Please, you must listen to me. There are noble beings you are dealing with, not savages!"

I wandered up to the gnomish man hollering at the guards anxiously, "What is going on here?" Curiosity always had been a weakness of mine. My hand rested on my axe handle gently as the gnome turned around to speak with me. *No offense to you, good sir, but I think I despise every gnome in Tarant. It's nothing personal.*

He seemed quite angry about whatever it was that was going on and his face was fully red from his shouting, "That totalitarian Captain Wheeler has some noble orcs who are striking for their rights trapped inside this factory!"

Now this is turning interesting... it's not every day orcs band together and do something LEGAL. "Captain Wheeler? What can you tell me of him?"

Recognition seemed to flare in the gnome's eyes and he calmed slightly as he talked to me, "I'm sorry, how rude of me not to introduce myself. I'm Councilman Babcock, and you are?"

Ugh... councilman... Gods, if I weren't so curious about what's going on here I would kill you where you stand. "I am Samantha Colburn. Now, about Captain Wheeler...?"

Mr. Babcock grinned as I told him my name, now all too happy to explain the details, "He's the Captain of the Tarantian Guard. He believes the orcs aren't fit to live, let alone have any rights. That's what this is all about - all the orcs want is the right to unionize. I am trying to keep this from deteriorating into... well, into what happened last time."

You can't very well just say something like that and then stop. Why does everybody always stop? "What happened last time?"

"It was a massacre! Capt. Wheeler mowed the protesters down with a mechanized gun. It was horrible. I suppose that's why they chose to hold up inside a factory this time. Instead of getting inside, he'd have to sacrifice some men, and that would look bad for him."

I was horrified at the very idea of it. I didn't hold any special love for orcs, but protestation was perfectly legal. "What happened to Wheeler after he killed the protestors?"

Mr. Babcock spit on the ground between his shoes, an action I found quite distasteful for a civilized person. "Nothing. Some on the council actually wanted to give him a medal!" *All the more reason to slaughter the whole blasted lot of them.*

"That's shocking!" The more I learned about that damned council the angrier I became with it. If it weren't such a fool's errand, I was of half a mind to put the fear of death into all of them, starting with the bastard in front of me. Even still it sounded tempting.

My attention was drawn away from my macabre thoughts by a deep sigh coming from the Mr. Babcock. "Yes, it is. And what is more, I feel it is directly responsible for the situation that has arisen here today. The orcs feel they have to do things like this to draw attention to their plight. They feel they can not effect any change through political ends, when they are seen as expendable beasts. It is all the more the pity, as Mr. Throgg could be just the man we are looking for."

The more I chat with this gent, the more I realize I don't have a damned clue what's going on here. Well, at least I'm going about fixing that. "Mr. Throgg? The man you are looking for? I'm sorry, I don't understand

what you're talking about."

"Donn Throgg is the leader of the orcs. Because he has human blood, we can make a case for his rights before the council. There has never been a case to determine the rights of an half-orc under the law."

Anger flashed inside of me once again, though this time not towards the council. It was disgusting how much weight people placed on looks. "I see. So Mr. Throgg appears to be human?"

Mr. Babcock nodded affirmatively, "He is unique in that his features have a distinctive orcish cast to them, but instead of making him look the dumb brute, it actually gives him somewhat the appearance of a swarthy rogue. And I've never met an half orc with the charisma he has, or near anyone else for that matter."

'Near' anyone else... but you just so happened to recognize me, didn't you?

"So what can be done to diffuse this situation?" If my persuasive talents could save a few lives, even orcish ones, and make a bloodthirsty guard captain look quite the fool, then I was all for it. "Donn Throgg must be convinced to give up this foolishness and work with us. This way he has chosen leads to death. Captain Wheeler will not let him leave that building alive if given the choice."

It was certainly within my abilities, but there was one thing that yet bothered me. "Why don't you go in there and propose your plan to him?" *I can't offer him the same protection you can, however much I distrust the council and everyone on it... including you.*

He sighed, "Because, as a councilmember, I represent the establishment which is holding him down. He will not speak with me. An outsider such as yourself, however, could gain his ear... especially one so renowned for her talents at negotiation." He winked at me and I shuddered a bit.

I love flattery as much as the next woman, but I will not take it coming from a gnome. I sighed, taking a deep breath. Surely the gnome in front of me wasn't directly responsible for the crimes of his fellow councilmen... here he was, crusading against the very man whom his fellows had heaped mounds of praise upon for his commitment to senseless violence. I couldn't bring myself to strike him down, no matter how badly I wanted to. At last, I gave in, "Okay, I will speak with him for you. What do I need to do?"

He grinned at me, shaking my hand excitedly. "Simply go in there and propose my plan to him. I am certain he will listen to reason." When he released my hand I noticed a key had been placed in my palm. *How clever.* He continued speaking in a quiet whisper, "They've locked themselves inside, but I convinced the owner to give me the key."

I nodded at Mr. Babcock understandingly, "I will return after I have convinced him." Ignoring the collection of guards standing just outside the factory, I strolled boldly up to the doors and unlocked one of them, slipping quietly inside amidst astonished glances. Being human, however, I wasn't exactly welcomed with open arms. "Who you? What you doing here? Wheeler send you? Speak, or I kill you!"

I guess I can't really blame them for their aggression, considering that little gathering outside. "I am here to speak with Mr. Throgg, to help you."

The orc gent thought my presence over for several moments before nodding slowly with a grunt. He pointed towards a door at the back of the factory, "He in back. You try anything, we kill you."

You don't have to remind me. I thanked him politely and made my way towards the door he'd pointed to. The orc guarding the door stepped aside, giving me a rather hateful glance but allowing me to proceed regardless. Strangely, I could understand their mistrust and yet they were still being quite reasonable for the situation they were in. In fact, they were being more reasonable than most humans would be.

The man sitting at the far end of that small room in the factory looked up at me as I entered and I was quite surprised when I looked at him.

This dark, brooding figure slowly turns to face me. His brutish features somehow accentuate his noble stature, rather than detract from it as one would expect.

"So. They have finally sent someone to kill me, have they?"

I was really getting quite tired of being accused of that. "I am here to deliver a message from Mr. Babcock." I knew he wouldn't like that, but it was best to be up front from the start.

He practically snorted as I said it. "Babcock? What does he want? Does he still think we can gain rights through the system?"

It seemed like being up front was costing me more than I'd thought it would, but there was no turning back now. I chose my words carefully, "Yes. He has devised a way for you to gain the right to unionize."

Donn's anger was quite apparent, and I felt a bit guilty at thinking it had something to do with his orcish blood. "Why should I listen to him?! Or you, for that matter?!"

Oh, I don't know, because the both of us are trying to save your foolish life? "You can continue to hide out in factories, I suppose..."

"Touché! Your wit serves you well, and you do make a good point. What is Babcock selling this time?"

I supposed that if anybody could appreciate a good barb it would be one with orcish blood. Being direct was the key after all. "Something that will put you legally beyond Wheeler's reach." *I'd bet that sounds good right about now, doesn't it?*

He nodded understandingly, crossing his arms as he reassessed me. "Hmmm. Alright, you have my ear. It would be intensely gratifying to use the law against Wheeler for once, instead of the other way around."

You can say that again. Oh, what I wouldn't give for a sympathetic ear that wants to destroy the council... Getting distracted by my own, private grievances wasn't going to solve the situation at hand... I did have so much trouble focusing sometimes. "He wants to establish your rights as someone who is half human."

That seemed to actually surprise the fellow. "I see. If it is done skillfully enough, it may work... and then what?"

All I had to do was keep talking, Mr. Throgg was certainly willing to listen to reason. "Once he proves you have rights, you can create a union..."

His face lit up at the idea, "For once old Babcock might be onto something!"

Even a bloody councilman has his uses I suppose... rotten bastard though he may be. No, that's not any fairer now than it was ten minutes ago. "He said Wheeler is sure to kill you if he gets the chance."

"Tell Babs not to worry. I'll be out of here under the cover of night. I'll meet up with him later to plot the humiliation of Wheeler, among other things. Thank you for delivering this message to me."

It was a shame I wouldn't be able to stick around long enough to see Wheeler humiliated, but there were more important things to be done. "You're welcome." I walked back out of the factory under the disapproving stares of the orcs. One of them even checked to make sure Throgg was still living as I exited. Being careful to not give Wheeler the wrong idea, I locked the door once again after leaving and approached Mr. Babcock to give him the good news.

I kept my voice a whisper so as not to clue Wheeler or his guards in on what was going on. "I convinced him to escape. He will meet with you later, he said."

"Splendid! Splendid! Thank you so much for your help. You've done the City of Tarant a great service!"

I may indeed have done Tarant a great service, but I can tell you're only paying me lip service. Hmph. I almost struck the bastard down against my better judgment, but that would undo everything I'd just done and it wouldn't solve much of anything in the end. "Thank you. Good day." I remained polite until I was just out of view and then let forth a stream of curses like never before. "Bloody son of a bitch councilman bastard! What I wouldn't give to slap that bloody grin off his blasted face!"

Franklin seemed rather surprised, "I say! That is not language becoming of a polite, young lady! Mr. Babcock was nothing but polite! What's got your skirt in a bundle?"

I'm not in the mood for your pleasantries, Franklin. "Oh, stuff it. I'm not exactly a young lady anymore. If you really want to know what I'm upset about then I'll tell you after we defeat Arronax. I've gone far enough off track as it is."

Oddly enough, that seemed to brighten his day. "Haha! A challenge, then? Very well, I accept! We shall defeat Arronax and return to a hero's welcome!"

With that business taken care of, I slipped into another empty factory and laid my technical manuals out on one of the tables. Vollinger and I pored over the manuals and skillfully repaired, altered, and put back together much of the junk we'd scavenged from Vendigroth. Sebastian, too, did what he could to help out. Although he couldn't help us directly, he did manufacture quite the supply of grenades for use on whatever horrible creatures infested the Void. I was sure they would come in handy.

Our work continued well into the dead of the night and the sun was already on the Eastern horizon by the time we finished up. I looked over the heaps of mostly broken junk we had left after the fact with a certain odd sense of pride. Of all the useless things we'd scavenged, we still managed to make out quite nicely. In the end we'd created two oversized pistols that actually looked to be quite frighteningly effective along with two pairs of heavy gloves.

Much to my surprise, Vollinger once again declined the brand new guns we'd manufactured together, instead preferring to stick with his trusty old rifle. It was quite a bit trustier than Old Mary, however, so that was certainly something. Sebastian had no compunctions about taking the 'new toy' from me, and Franklin was only too happy to receive Old Mary Mk2. Virgil and I each took a pair of the war gauntlets I'd fashioned using the exceptionally high quality sheets of metal we'd found in Vendigroth along with a couple pairs of their durable, cloth gloves. It was a bit crude, but it functioned well enough.

It seemed like even Virgil and Franklin had kept busy throughout our lengthy manufacturing process. Virgil had an arm full of magickal potions and other assorted goodies, and Franklin had just returned from several of the local tech shops loaded to the gills with salves and medicinal remedies. "I think that about covers it, then..."
Arronax, we're coming for you.

I couldn't help but overhear the paper seller shouting at the top of his lungs on my way towards the docks, "THROGG ESCAPES!! Get your paper here!" *It's hardly been one night! News travels so fast these days...* I paid the gentleman two coins just to get a good look at the story.

EXTRA!	 THE TARANTIAN 	EXTRA!
Price 2 Coins	The Best Source of News-worthy Items in Arcanum	Price 2 Coins
THROGG ESCAPES!!		
WHEELER BLAMES INTERFERENCE OF BABCOCK AND UNNAMED STRANGER	"I cannot believe the "esteemed" Mr. Babcock had the gall to interfere in a Guard matter! I will see to having him brought up on charges!" Seethed Capt. Wheeler of the Tarantian Guard. He continued, "this was the day the threat of Donn Throgg was going to end, and Babcock's interference has set this menace loose upon Tarant again!" Mr. Babcock denied knowledge of the unnamed stranger Wheeler claimed as	Babcock's accomplice and also declined to comment on the whole situation, except to say, "I think it is high time we treated all races equally, and stop the evil racism practiced by Wheeler and his ilk." WEATHER The Meteorological Service Bureau of Tarant is Predicting sunny weather for the next Two to Three days, with an increasing Chance of Precipitation before the Passage of a Fortnight. TAX INCREASE
After a carefully orchestrated operation in which Donn Throgg, the infamous labor agitator, was moments away from being apprehended, Councilman Babcock and an unnamed stranger conspired to effect Throgg's escape.		The Parliament is again considering Raising the Levy of Incomes in Tarant by another 2 coins for every 100 earned. The Speaker has refused all Public Criticism of the Increase, by Citing the importance of Public Works projects currently under way. PUBLIC SERVICE ANNOUNCEMENT There will be a City Council meeting this Friday which is Open to the Public. The Meeting will commence sharply at 7pm. EDITORIAL REMINDER

Hmph... unnamed accomplice. I suppose it's better that way in the end. I tossed the paper in a rubbish bin with a smile on my face and boarded the ship. "Vollinger, let's head off to Roseborough."

"Of course, Madam." He nodded at me, beginning to turn the wheel of the ship even as he responded. The journey felt like such a short one, but considering I treated it like it might very well be the last journey I would ever take by sea, I supposed that was only normal. All of us dealt with the uneasiness in our minds differently. Vollinger seemed content to steer the ship and bark orders at Franklin, but he always had been rather practical. Franklin couldn't sit still, so he was all too happy to do whatever Vollinger asked of him. As long as it kept him busy, he, too, was happy. Sebastian sat inside the cabin beneath the deck, tossing a worn ball of leather down the hallway and watching Terry fetch it. Those two were getting along better and better.

As for myself, I stood by the edge of the ship, simply gazing out at the sea with Virgil by my side. We didn't say anything to each other the entire journey, and we didn't have to. We just shared those quiet moments together, enjoying them while they lasted. I was almost sad, in a way, when we finally arrived at Roseborough. The time for relaxation was over, and I now had to face my fate, however unfair it might've been. *No, it's perfectly fair... I deserve this and more...*

Nasrudin was waiting inside the Ring of Brodgar just as he said he would. He gave me a stern stare as I approached, still commanding quite the presence even in his old age. Standing amidst the stones of Brodgar, he was even more menacing... truly, this was where he belonged. "Are you prepared to face Arronax?"

Oh how I wished this moment would never come. I had kept telling myself throughout my journey in the Wastes that I would grow accustomed to the idea of being banished, but even if I'd been given a decade to adjust I don't think I could've. There was no easy way to think about it, being banished into the great unknown Void was about as horrifying as anything possibly could be. I nodded at him slowly, unwilling to back out now after having come so far, "Yes." "Then listen. May your gods accompany you to the other side and help you to stop Arronax."

I shook my head sadly, "They had better, or we're all in for a bit of trouble." It was ironic that the very same thing that made me want to fail the most, my own death, was also the one that had provided me with the greatest unearthly blessing. With Velorien watching over

me, I somehow knew that I would truly be ready to face Arronax. At the same time, I so desperately wished that I wasn't ready, that I could give it my all and still it wouldn't be enough. *Frederick... I want to return to you....*

Wordlessly, Nasrudin began chanting a spell so powerful that my skin cried out in pain the second he fixed his stare on me. I could feel the world around me fading away, I could see the black closing in around everything. The ground cracked and then broke beneath my feet, and I hung there, suspended in mid-air, my heart racing in my chest.

As I began to descend downward I gazed up at Nasrudin in horror, but he was no more. After finishing the spell that sent the six of us into the Void, he had collapsed lifelessly on the grass. *Goodbye, Nasrudin... in the end, I suppose it really doesn't matter that I'm not your reincarnation... but I don't think I ever could've lived up to your legacy even if I was.*

I could feel myself shifting across the barrier between worlds even as I stared up at the ground closing back up after I'd passed it by. I floated in midair, dizzy, bordering on unconsciousness for what seemed like hours. At last, I landed on solid ground... gently, somehow. I stood in what appeared to be the Ring of Brodgar, but different... darker, twisted. The small ring of grass that surrounded it was the only grass I could see in the entire place and at its edge I saw ringed, metal spires protruding upwards from the ground, surrounding the great stones I stood within.

Before I could even get my bearings on where I was I heard a horrible and all-too-familiar screech.

Gods, the portal in the forest... Liam... THIS is what that was all about? No... the rift that Stennar used to escape while the machine was yet incomplete... it must've opened a hole elsewhere... I was stunned, but the lizard bastard that bit into my leg ferociously woke me from my endless train of thought. I brought my axe down on its spine, killing it in a single strike.

Gunfire erupted from behind me as Franklin and Sebastian tried out

their new firearms, lizards nearly exploding as the bullets contacted their flesh. Terry darted around a nearby stone, leaping at a nearby lizard and tearing its throat out effortlessly. We'd been in the Void less than two minutes and already we had started paving our path in blood.

Fighting Void lizards was nothing new to me, and I cut them to ribbons just as I had the very first time. Back then, I'd known so little about combat... been so naive. Virgil was right, I really had changed since I met him. The lizards herded more thickly here, though that made quite a bit of sense. The six of us fought through them regardless, leaving not a single one alive as we desperately battled our way towards the far end of the floating chunk of rock we seemed to be stranded on.

Towards the edge of that rocky platform there was a strange machine the likes of which I'd never seen before. It was a platform clearly intended to be stood upon by several persons, and connected by a thick, metal rail to what looked to be not only a power source but also some type of control box. Curiously, I stepped onto the platform. I could hear Virgil shouting behind me, "Not again! Wait! Be careful!"

I could feel every part of my body slowly rearranging itself, though strangely it wasn't an uncomfortable feeling. Sparks flew forth from the platform beneath me and my vision grew rather suddenly hazy. When I at last opened my eyes I was in another place entirely, still whole despite the sound feeling that I would not be. There wasn't terribly much time to consider exactly what just happened, other than a technological equivalent to teleportation. I was being set upon by more of those bastard, floating jellyfish that I'd grown to hate so long ago.

Vollinger's bullets were no less effective against them this time than they had been the previous time and he killed one of the smaller ones even before it could reach us. Franklin and Sebastian opened up as well, their unparalleled firepower bringing down more of the creatures as quickly as they could pull the triggers. Franklin shouted gleefully, "Take that, you floating... whatever you are!"

I launched myself forward, slicing apart the largest and most

menacing of the strange things. It split apart easily beneath my blade, not even able to reach out towards me with its acidic tentacles. Considering I felt woefully unprepared to repair my own armor in this hellhole, it would certainly be for the best if I continued to avoid getting hit. Luckily for me, I was truly a master at the art of dodging.

When the ground was littered with the corpses of the strange jellyfish I finally noticed a rather large structure that dwarfed the whole of the platform I now stood upon. I couldn't make out an entrance to it amidst the twisted and broken trees that surrounded it, but there was a staircase off towards one side of it that looked promising. I held my axe firmly out in front of me and cautiously descended it.

The walls at the bottom of the stairs were smooth and intricately engraved. It was obvious that a great deal of labor had been invested in their construction. That wasn't the most surprising thing I saw, however. There was a massive, spectral snake at least three times as long as I was tall, just slithering up and down the hallway in utter silence. Off to the side of the hall I could see a circular doorway blocked by tendrils of metal that somewhat resembled a spiderweb. On either side of that strange door were spectral guards, armored in black plate with dozens of protruding spikes. I could hear the voice of the nearest one booming at me as I drew near, "Hold there. What's your business here?"

I held my axe out in front of me menacingly, giving the ghost a hateful stare, "I'm here for Arronax. Get out of my way if you know what's good for you!"

The guard seems taken aback, surprised by my aggression. "Uh... yes, of course. We were told to expect visitors. Arronax is inside. Feel free to enter and speak with him."

Well, that was easier than expected. I lowered my axe a bit and took a few cautious steps forward, keeping an eye on the spectral guard. As I approached, the strange door opened for me, the thick metal blades retracting into the sides of the doorway. *Why do I not like how that door operates?* I stepped through quickly, lest the door skewer me as I tried to make my way through. Thankfully, it was well-behaved. The others followed after me nervously, obviously wondering the same thing I did when I skipped through.

My attention wasn't focused on my companions, however... I stared straight ahead to the elf in black robes, sitting on the ground in the middle of a glowing, green barrier of energy. *So it all comes to this... call it what you will, good vs. evil, technology vs. magick... I don't care. All I want is to get back and begin searching for the spirit of my son, or die trying.*

Before me sits an elf, his legs crossed, his head down. An air of weariness surrounds him. He notices my presence, and slowly, purposefully, stands and addresses me.

"Yes, what is it?"

His voice was firm and clear, his words pronounced in a very particular manner. He looked at me with a tired stare not at all becoming of the ancient evil that still plagued Arcanum even today. I glared back at him with hatred in my eyes, never once letting up my grip on my axe. "Arronax, I presume?"

He glanced at me and at my companions curiously, "Your presumption is correct. And who might I have the pleasure of addressing?"

I felt like a fool, politely introducing myself to Arronax, though I would have felt even more foolish if I didn't. "I am Samantha Colburn." *Samantha, meet Arronax. Arronax, Samantha. Why do clashes with ancient evils in storybooks never mention this awkward part? Aren't we supposed to be taunting each other mercilessly by now, explaining exactly why we can't let each other live in the most grandiose fashion we can muster?*

The tone in his voice remained unchanged. "Well, Samantha Colburn, what brings you to my corner of oblivion?"

Damn you! I can't stand this... I've had it with this nonsense! "Enough with the pleasantries, Arronax. I've come to stop you."

"Interesting. And just what is it that you are going to stop me from doing? I have so many things on my social calendar these days, it is difficult to know which you are making reference to, in particular." His obvious sarcasm only added to my anger. *Do you really think to defeat me with witty banter? I came to fight you with my axe, not my vocabulary!* If he insisted on being so snide, I would have to spell

things out as clearly as possible. "I will not permit you to escape the Void and return to Arcanum."

He actually cracked a slight smile and I desperately wished he would remove that barrier of his so we could get to the fighting already. "You will not permit me? How droll! You really have absolutely no idea of what you are involved with here, do you?" At the very least his attitude was affirming my resolve to kill him in the most gruesome way possible. I still didn't like the Vendigroth device, however.

"It doesn't matter. I'm here to stop you, it is as simple as that." My resolve was firm. Unlike him, I'd gone to my banishment calmly and willingly. Now that I was in the Void, nothing could shake my will.

Again I felt his stare passing over me, silently judging me. "You are so sure of yourself! It must be comforting to be free of self doubt."

Stuff a sock in it. "I don't sit around bemoaning my fate, if that is what you mean." *I bemoan it while I walk... you get more done that way.*

He sighed heavily, shaking his head. In that moment I could sense a genuine sadness in him. "I haven't had opportunity to do much else... destiny seems to play unfairly with some of us, don't you agree?"

Are you serious? No, you've got to be kidding me... all this time and you really believe that what happened to you was UNFAIR? "You are here because of your actions, not some cruel twist of fate."

"Do not misunderstand me, I take full responsibility for my actions." He pauses, dramatically.

"Though how are one's actions determined, really? How is our view of the world shaped? Mine was shaped by arguably the most powerful individual in the world, my father. He raised me on tales of the righteous superiority of the elves and the destiny that brought us to rule over all the races."

Oh it's so bloody easy to blame somebody else. Who do you think you're fooling? It's Nasrudin's fault?! Get over yourself! "I don't think it was Nasrudin's intent that you destroy a whole city."

Naturally, Arronax got defensive at that accusation. "What did he expect? He shoved a young, immature, inexperienced fool into a position of immense power and set me loose on the world." *Now that's... that's an odd thing for YOU to be saying.* His voice quieted down to a regretful scowl, "Why didn't he stop me... he should have stopped me..."

I didn't quite believe what I was hearing. "Wait, are you trying to tell me you feel guilt over what you did?" No, I couldn't believe it... I didn't dare. He was just trying to catch me off guard.

He nodded quite assuredly, "Most certainly. I have had two thousand years of my grievous errors in judgment replaying themselves in my mind. One tends to grow a bit of a conscience in all that time." He sounded sincere, but he'd probably been planning that speech of his for months... and I was falling right into it.

Well, I certainly wouldn't play the fool, and only a fool would take a person like Arronax at face value. "You'll excuse me if I don't believe you're overcome with guilt."

"What you do or do not believe is of no concern to me, my friend." He just seemed so damned matter of fact about it that I desperately wanted to believe him. I couldn't, though... I had to be guarded against whatever it was he was planning. "If you are so regretful, why are you trying to return for revenge?"

His shoulders slumped forward and he sighed deeply, giving me a rather incredulous stare. It was as if he was beginning to tire of trying to convince me. "I have nothing planned, save to live out the rest of my days in peace."

Hogwash. You attacked me! You started this! I didn't ask to be some bloody pawn of prophecy! "I tire of your lies. Come out of your shell and fight me." I hefted my axe up menacingly, preparing myself.

Arronax merely laughed, and laughed, and laughed. It was a dark, arrogant laugh and I would expect nothing less from the likes of him. It echoed off of the walls in that expansive, empty chamber several times over, crossing back on itself as it reverberated back and forth. "You fool! You think this is my protection? This is my prison! I've

been trapped inside this shell for nearly two thousand years!"

There was no joke in what he was saying, no deception... his anger was genuine. "What? That's impossible! This must be some sort of trick." *You almost had me with that one, Arronax... no, you still almost have me... it's so ludicrous it must be true.*

"I assure you, it is not a lighthearted jest, though I wish that it were. I have been trapped here since soon after I was banished to this realm." I could see it in his eyes that he was not trying to deceive me. He could've been the best liar in the world, but his eyes were honest and direct. "Who could have possibly trapped someone of your power here?" The more I thought about it, the more I knew in my heart that it was true... he wouldn't just be standing there if he could possibly move.

Even as he spoke the words they made a terrible amount of sense and, inwardly, I cringed. "This is Kerghan's doing. When I first came here and realized what he was becoming, I attempted to stop him. Our battle was intense, yet brief. As you can see, I was not the victor."

No, Kerghan... why him? If there's one man I could possibly be more afraid of than Arronax, it's Kerghan. "Why didn't he kill you?"

"He wasn't powerful enough. He held me with this binding magick when I was regenerating. It looks as if I was correct as to the effects of his experimentation, though. His dark magicks have transformed him hideously, in body and spirit."

It seemed so strange to me, the idea that Kerghan had somehow become more powerful than the great Arronax. I was going to be up against an even worse evil than I had thought possible. *Worse than Arronax? Indeed, somehow it's true....* "What happened when you had him banished?" I needed to know everything. All my preparations, everything I'd brought with me... it was all for nothing.

"Nothing, strangely enough." Arronax's voice took on a rather uncharacteristically bright tone. I could see him staring off into space even as he thought of it. "He went quietly to his fate..."

My, if that doesn't just explain the whole thing. Oh, wait, it doesn't.

"Sounds like a coward to me." Since he wouldn't share information

when I outright asked for it, I had to try provoking it out of him. It had worked before, so it seemed wise to try it a second time.

"I wouldn't attribute his attitude to cowardice. He was resigned to his fate. Somewhat like me, he would not change his course or compromise his beliefs, regardless of the inevitable outcome. His brilliance was such that I don't think any of us understood what was going through his mind, actually."

Sure enough, my bold statements did far more to loosen his lips than asking direct questions ever did. "It almost sounds as if you admire him." *If that's the verbal sparring match you'd like to have, so be it. I suppose I'm here to stop Kerghan, then, and I'm not leaving until you tell me what I want to know.*

Arronax gave my statement a bit of thought, correcting it as he deemed necessary, "Fascination would be a more appropriate term. I am intrigued by the workings of his brilliant, twisted mind. Have no doubt, though, I would destroy him without a second thought were the opportunity to present itself."

It made me wonder if sending him to the Void had really been the proper answer in the first place. "Do you regret having him banished?" *Ugh, who knows what Arcanum would be like today if Kerghan hadn't been banished? Nevermind...*

"Regret, no," Arronax shook his head, "though I can't help but feel that I was so set against him simply because he was human. Regardless of my childish excesses, though, there is no denying the base evilness of his actions." *Hmph. You're not really one to talk about evil.*

Despite my personal opinions on Arronax, right now I needed information only he could give. "Hmm... let me get all of this straight, then. The dark elves desired your return so you could help bring the whole world under elven rule. Thinking Kerghan was you, they had the Black Mountain Clan banished in order to construct a machine for Kerghan to return. Then it would have been Kerghan that attacked me on the plains of Morbihan...? Do you really think he's the one behind all of this?"

"Being that I am trapped in here, my opportunities to get information are, shall we say, a bit limited. On the rare occasion Kerghan has

deigned to visit me to play his intellectual games, he has dropped some veiled clues that might make sense in light of what you have told me. If I had to hazard a guess, I would say Kerghan is impersonating me."

But why...? Kerghan's plenty evil enough, he certainly doesn't need Arronax's namesake to strike fear into the whole of Arcanum. "To what end?"

Arronax explained, but haughtily. Although he may very well have developed a conscience during his banishment, there was that streak of arrogance that told me I really was dealing with the one and only Arronax. "It sounds as if these dark elves you mentioned have patterned themselves after the misguided philosophy of my youth. They are proving to be powerful allies in his quest to return to Arcanum, it seems. I doubt they would be willing to help Kerghan the Terrible return to exact his revenge."

I suppose that does make a good bit of sense. I had realized it long ago, but I affirmed my suspicions vocally. "So Kerghan is the one I'm here to stop."

Arronax nodded at me, "That would appear to be the case. If you were able to facilitate my release from this prison, it would be my pleasure to help you destroy Kerghan."

I knew I was treading on thin ice. *Even if he isn't the one I've come to defeat, he's STILL Arronax.* I scoffed at him disbelievingly, "How? Kerghan defeated you last time you fought."

"I am not saying it will be easy to defeat Kerghan. In fact, the attempt might be fatal. Yet I believe it worth the risk. We cannot let him return to Arcanum; it would mean the end of all life there. I have a few... acquaintances on this side that may be interested in helping us as well, should you succeed in releasing me."

For some reason, I wasn't nearly as bothered by the idea that it might be fatal as I probably should've been. I felt so selfish but, if I could return to Frederick that much sooner, I welcomed death. It was so hard to forget my memories of that hauntingly peaceful place.... *I've got to focus on the present. I may not have been preparing for Kerghan, but the weapons I bring will me will work all the same.* "I have the

Vendigroth Device."

That seemed like it pleased him greatly. Whatever lies he might be telling, he certainly did like the idea of Kerghan's ultimate destruction. "Then our task should be at least a fraction easier. All we need to do is hurt him enough so that he attempts to regenerate himself, and then you can use the Device on him. Of course, this is easier spoken of than accomplished."

I sighed. A part of me really wanted to trust him. I could certainly use the help of Arronax when going up against yet another ancient evil. Fight fire with fire, as the saying went. "I'm not sure I can trust you." *I want to, but... you're Arronax...*

His voice was a mixture of amused condescension and honest sadness. "Your reaction is... understandable." He looked at me with a sarcastic grin, "Perhaps you should gain an audience with Kerghan himself. I think a conversation with him will erase any doubt as to the veracity of my claims."

You can't be serious. I know you're not serious. "Where is he? How do I find him?" I asked despite my reluctance. The only problem talking to Kerghan was likely to solve was the intrusion of a technologically-inclined outsider into his corner of the Void.

"I do not know. There is a portal in the room behind me, perhaps you can use it to travel to other parts of the Void..."

Arronax's voice remained as sarcastic as ever. He obviously knew as well as I did that nothing would come of such a conversation. There was no reasoning with madmen. "There are still things I need answers to." *Come on, Arronax... you're so bloody charismatic when you want to be... make me trust you.*

He sighed impatiently, ever one to allow his arrogance to get the better of him. Of all the lessons he might've learned, that was certainly not one of them. I imagined a lack of contact with anybody aside from Kerghan for a couple thousand years was bound to do that to a chap anyhow. "What are your questions?"

Well, gee, sorry to be such a bloody bother about it. "Where is the Black Mountain Clan?"

He shrugged at me, amused. "I do not know." *Yes, all right, I know you've not been able to leave since first arriving. You don't need to remind me.* "I would assume the gate they are building is located somewhere near Kerghan's castle, though."

His response at least reminded me that I knew very little about the strange place I now found myself in. The curious mix of technology and magick had been gnawing at me since I first arrived. "What can you tell me about the Void?"

"I do not know much, but what I do know is that there used to exist some sort of civilization here, and the world was not broken up into distinct land masses. I do not know if some ancient war destroyed this realm, or it was the doing of one of the heinous villains the Council banished."

That seemed like a rather dark prospect. "The Council didn't even know what the Void was?" *That's the thing about bloody mages... always wrestling with forces they don't understand... at least with technology you've got to know every bloody thing about it before you go mucking about.*

My meaning was clear, and it seemed he even agreed with me. "It seems irresponsible in hindsight, but at the time they felt the Void was oblivion. Nothing was supposed to be over here." *Damned bloody mages...*

Harping at him certainly wasn't likely to do any good, no matter how tragic it seemed. I certainly couldn't even begin to right any wrongs committed well over two thousand years prior. It seemed like two hundred was about my limit. I thought carefully before asking my next question. "Why did you destroy Vendigroth?" *If I'm going to bloody free you, that's one question I want an answer to.*

He shrugged sadly, staring at the ground with regret. "When they began constructing their device to protect themselves from my unprovoked attacks, I lashed out without thinking and destroyed them all. My fear of what technology could bring was so pervasive, I never thought there was any other solution. Of course, I regret it now. I still think of my father and what I did to him. Even though he must bear a fair share of the blame for what happened, I do not think

he deserved his fate."

Little do you know... he gave his life to send me here to stop you... and here you are, so damned focused on how he 'wronged' you by not stopping your recklessness sooner. I would get nowhere arguing with him. He was every bit as stubborn as I would have expected him to be. "So when at last your father DID stop you, and you came here... you just attacked Kerghan outright? Unprovoked?"

"I was a bit full of myself back then. All the damage and death I had caused had not even scratched the surface of my conscience at the time. Full of blind rage and arrogance, I was."

You've still got plenty of the latter. For all of the points that I disagreed with Arronax on, I was at least convinced of his genuine regret. Although I cringed at the idea of setting him loose upon the world, if he could help me defeat Kerghan... it might all be worth it. "I think Kerghan needs to be stopped."

He sighed helplessly, staring at me, "I could not concur more vigorously. If you would facilitate my release from my prison, I would join with you to defeat him."

I glanced at my companions briefly, noting how the uncertain looks in their own eyes matched the feelings I myself held. Turning back to Arronax with a heavy sigh, I finally answered, "What do I need to do?"

"I am afraid I do not know. I do not believe Kerghan could maintain this from a distance, so there must be something near here..."

In the end, that arrogant confidence of his amounted to a whole lot of nothing. *Fat lot of good your attitude does when you're still trapped helplessly, eh? Hmm... something near here... what's nearby? I suppose that snake just outside the door is something of an oddity...* I'd been so guarded that I hadn't bothered to put my axe back on my belt, so the conclusion I came to next was quite a natural one.

I ran out of the door, screaming at the top of my lungs. The spectral snake was slithering past just as I emerged and I dove towards it, my axe flashing through the air with practiced precision. The upper half of the strange beast's body slumped to the floor with a curious lack of blood, its bottom half having been completely separated.

The guards behind me grew quite suddenly alarmed and I turned my attention towards them as well. *Kerghan's lapdogs... let me send you back where you belong.* Before they could even react to the sudden blur that had burst from Arronax's chamber, I was attacking them as well. The first one went down with an unearthly groan by the time the second one even drew his blade.

The sound of gunfire roared from the doorway and the second guard stumbled backwards. With one final bang he finally toppled the rest of the way over, his spectral figure crashing to the ground without the slightest hint of noise. Even when victorious, fighting against such obviously disembodied spirits was quite unnerving.

"Well, that was invigorating, wasn't it?" Sebastian laughed outright while Virgil chuckled nervously. Franklin cheered at me and Vollinger clapped quietly. Terry nosed Sebastian's bag of jerky. *I suppose it's a bit too early to be patting ourselves on the back just yet.* I strode back into Arronax's chamber, noting uneasily that his peculiar green shell had at last vanished.

Thankfully, the look on his face was one of gratitude and he bowed towards me most graciously. "Many thanks for releasing me from my horribly lengthy incarceration, madam. I am at your service."

If this isn't just about the very last damned thing I expected to happen... "It is high time we showed Kerghan the error of his ways."

"We would do well to recruit some help. I know some beings in this realm that we might be able to convince to follow us. Perhaps you have heard of them: the Bane of Kree, Gorgoth, and Kraka-tur?" Anywhere else and I would've laughed the madman in front of me out of the room. That madman was Arronax himself, and we were about to confront Kerghan the Terrible... as much as I didn't like the idea of teaming up with even more legendary horrors, it did seem somewhat prudent. "Do you think they would join us?"

He simply shrugged. "We can only hope. We will have to convince them that Kerghan is a danger to them as well." For all his nonchalance, he had an excellent point.

Worrying about whether they would or wouldn't join us was pointless. I was a negotiator, I had to get them to join up. No matter how horrible any of them were, Kerghan was even moreso. "How do we find them?" *Hmph... I cannot believe I'm going to go through with this. Say, Arronax, old fellow! Have you seen the Bane of Kree around? I was hoping we might have a nice chat!*

"I don't know. We will need to find a way to navigate amongst the different land masses of the Void using the ancient portals."

Well, that's easy. Step on platform, try not to be sick, step off. "Let's go." Even as I forced myself forwards, I was all too aware that the lesser evil was still evil.

Chapter the Sixty Ninth: Final Preparations

With a new companion in tow, the lot of us headed through the strange teleportation machine and onto the next landmass. As soon as I arrived I could see the towering castle that rose up above the edges of the platform. Frankly, it would've been impossible to miss. It seemed that Arronax noticed it, too. "Hmph. A monument to his arrogance." *You're not allowed to make that accusation.* "No doubt that is where he's having the machine built."

"Thanks for the tip," I did my best to get along with him, even though I was still uneasy having him along. "Let's head to the next teleporter, then. We'd best prepare before fighting our way in. I don't think his ghostly guardians are going to be too pleased about your coming in along with us."

Arronax chuckled, "You are most assuredly correct, madam. Preparations would be quite wise, indeed." I passed by the castle, instead searching for the way forward. I didn't quite know what I had expected, but the Void was certainly not easy to navigate by any stretch of the imagination.

There were plenty of spectral warriors guarding the landmass the castle was built on, though I had been hoping to slip by them without much trouble. That hope was dashed the moment they spied Arronax casually strolling about by my side. They unsheathed translucent, purple swords and charged at me, swinging.

I spun around them easily, quickly destroying the first two without even hardly expending any effort. I saw two more of the bastards not far away, already preparing for battle, and behind them a crimson-hued specter at least twice their size. Seeing what I'd done to their companions, they were able to anticipate my moves and I took a solid

slice to my right shoulder.

The larger guardian charged into the fray the moment he heard me groan, and even as he ran he summoned a fourth warrior with a mere gesture. *Gods, a spirit that can summon other spirits...?! What madness does Kerghan suffer to create such a thing?!* In the very next moment his massive greatsword was in his hands and he swung at me unsuccessfully. *One time is all you bastards get. I don't plan on dying just yet.*

As soon as I ducked down, a hail of gunfire launched forth and the guardian that had managed to successfully strike me fell to the ground. No sooner had I stood back up than I heard Arronax's confident voice calling out, "Incoming!" *Incoming...? What's that supposed to...? Son of a bitch!* I dove out of the way as far and as fast as I could, a scorching explosion hot on my heels. I hit the ground with a rather firm impact and turned to see a small, flaming crater just where the other ghosts had been.

Virgil was livid, "Are you crazy?! Watch where you're throwing those things! You could've killed her!" I slowly climbed back to my feet, brushing off the dust and small rocks that clung to my armor.

Arronax scolded Virgil haughtily, "In case you hadn't been paying attention, the guardians nearly surrounding her could've done the same."

I scowled, walking up to the both of them, "Can you two please shut the hell up? Virgil, I understand your anger, but I'm fine... this time. Arronax, give me a bit more warning next time? You're not the only one of us that knows how to fight. We're on the same side, let's all try to get along despite our varying... temperaments."

Virgil was quick to spit out a, "Y-yes, of course," with a small bow. Arronax merely scoffed and began heading off towards the teleporter. For all that it seemed he was unaffected by the whole thing, he did seem at least slightly ashamed. When I thought about it, that was probably the very first fireball he'd tossed in the last two thousand years... *Nobody's perfect... least of all him.*

Since the way to the teleporter was fully cleared, I followed along and we all stepped inside. The landmass we came to next seemed, for the most part, empty. I explored around it curiously for a bit, but in the end there was naught but another teleporter. I was just about to step inside when Arronax stopped me, "Wait! Do you see those stairs over there?"

Indeed, there was a set of stairs leading down the nearby cliff, though they were fairly well hidden. "Yes, I do now... do you know what's down there?"

He nodded, "I've heard that a most powerful weapon is stored here in the Void. If I had to guess, the cave at the bottom of those stairs will lead us to it. If what the Bane of Kree told me when he visited is correct, it's a blade of some sort... and you do seem to be skilled with melee weapons."

"Yes, that I am." *A blade, eh? Well, I am rather partial to this axe... but it could be worth checking out. The technology in the rest of this place is spectacular, surely a blade crafted here would follow suit.* "Why don't we check it out? It couldn't hurt, at least." We headed down the stairway and into the nearby cave.

Immediately upon entering I was set upon by a vile lizard. Its scales were red instead of bluish-green and it charged at me with a swiftness uncommon among its kind. No matter how swift the bastard was, I was still a master at dodging and I slipped quite easily past its feeble strike. My axe followed along in one fluid motion, cleaving the beast clear into two pieces in only a single attack.

The cavern continued onward, branching off in several directions, each of them filled with yet more beasts. *Well, something is definitely here, that's for sure... I suppose I can only hope Arronax is being level with me.* I wandered down the leftmost passageway, becoming quickly swarmed by lizards as I progressed.

It all happened so fast that there wasn't hardly any time to react. The first lizard to charge at me was cut down in an instant, but he was quickly replaced by two more. I heard that familiar and disturbingly welcome sound of rapid gunfire and several more lizards fell, yet

somehow still more kept on coming. Terry was right there at my side, tearing apart one lizard with his bare teeth for every two I dismembered with my axe. Even Arronax helped out in his own way, now being significantly more cautious not to wound me. *Thanks, I think.*

Still I somehow became surrounded on all sides, the legion of lizards never seeming to cease. They bit at me and clawed at the open wounds, hissing and growling menacingly as they did so. I winced in pain, gritting my teeth at the familiar burn of poison in my veins. *This blade had better be bloody worth it.*

Somehow, the endless tide of lizards eventually ceased. There were no spectacular explosions or crafty cave-ins, just a whole lot of blood, bullets, and a maddening, foolish persistence to continue onward. When it was all over and I stared upon the dozens of charred corpses littering the ground I had to grudgingly admit that Arronax was helping out quite a bit. "Arronax... for what it's worth, thanks. You're pretty good in a pinch."

He smirked at me, amused, "I certainly don't need to be told that, but thank you all the same. You're not too bad yourself, though I admit it was hard to get a good look at what was going on with so many bloody lizards swarming all over the place. Nasty place, this is... it makes me wish I would've had more of a chance to explore the Void before being trapped in that godforsaken shell."

Our brief conversation was interrupted by the sound of Franklin's voice, "I'm not afraid of the likes of you! I'll take you all on by myself if I have to!"

I rolled my eyes and stared at Arronax sheepishly, "Looks like Franklin's found trouble. We'd better go help him." Without waiting to hear Arronax's response, I ran off.

The thick hallway widened out even further a short distance ahead, giving way to a rather expansive room. A thick, massive blade sat upon a spike-studded altar at the far end of the room, dimly lit by the haunting glow of the jellyfish creatures floating between the altar and myself. Even in that pale light I could see the intense copper

luster on the blade, the subtle shine off of its razor-thin edge. I had to have it.

First the smaller jellyfish creatures crowded around the entrance to the room, Franklin firing away at them overzealously. Vollinger and Sebastian's guns joined the deep chorus shortly after, and even Arronax contributed a fireball of his own. The cavern trembled beneath the force of so much power, both technological and magickal. I didn't even dare get close to where they were concentrating their attacks.

As soon as the dust settled, I darted into the room and stared upon the blade greedily. I reached out my hand and picked it up, feeling how amazingly light it was. Carrying it was effortless, swinging it was like attacking with the wind itself. Despite its weightlessness, the blade itself was sturdier than a thousand year old castle and the edge so awe-inspiringly sharp that it cut the solid stone ground almost before the blade even came in contact with it.

I gripped it firmly and easily in my hand, quickly becoming accustomed to the new weight. When I was satisfied I handed my axe over to Arronax, knowing I would never need it again. He looked at the axe with a half-shocked and half-amused look on his face. "I suppose I'd be willing to carry this... thing... for you. I certainly hope you don't expect me to use it."

Although common sense told me not to push my luck, sometimes I just couldn't help myself. "Come now, you've got to broaden your horizons! Keep an open mind and all that. The world's changed in two thousand years, you know." The closest thing I received to a response was a horrified look on his face that almost suggested he found himself standing downwind from a paper factory.

Laughter almost overtook me and he only sighed in response. *I suppose it's good the old fellow at least has some sense of humor.* With my new blade in hand, we left the twisting cavern and proceeded towards the teleporter to the next landmass. Almost as soon as we arrived I could hear the horrible screech of more jellyfish creatures and I darted off of our landing platform to combat them.

With my new blade, I was a nigh unstoppable whirlwind. I cut through them in a flurry of strikes more than twice as fast as I possibly could've with my axe. Almost half a dozen creatures had fallen beneath my blade before the rest of my companions even realized battle had begun. Arronax was quite impressed with my skills, and applauded the increased efficiency.

I could see the teleporter leading to the next area, but standing between it and myself were at least two dozen more floating jellyfish bastards of all sizes and colors. I breathed in deeply, preparing myself for the burning pain that was sure to follow when I made my attack. As if signalling the start of a race, Franklin's gun fired off and the wall of creatures charged at me just as quickly as I charged at them.

Between the three gunners and Arronax all slinging powerful attacks at a range, fully half of the creatures were dead before I could even reach them. I was only thankful that my companions were accurate in their strikes, or I myself would've been dead long before reaching the creatures. They screeched and flailed at me as I approached, but I dodged around them almost without effort.

When I finally began swinging my blade it was like an explosion had erupted amidst them. In mere seconds I'd killed a half a dozen, and the rest fell in seconds more. I was awestruck by my own skill when wielding such a high-quality blade and I began to understand exactly why this particular weapon had been so carefully concealed and heavily guarded. *Gods, this thing... this thing is horrible.* As much as I was grateful for the blade in my coming fight against Kerghan, I had already resolved to leave it in the Void if I were ever able to make it out alive.

I stepped through the teleporter at the far end of the landmass, instantly warping to the next one much to the displeasure of my stomach. There wasn't any time to dwell on the feeling, however, and not because I was beset upon by horrid creatures. Quite the opposite, the landmass was almost entirely deserted... save for a lone man wandering about it with no purpose.

This man has the look of a fierce warrior. His heavily muscled body is covered in scars and tattoos. He sniffs the air as me approach. "A fresh arrival, eh? You still have the smell of the world on you."

Well, that was rude. I don't think I've ever been actively sniffed before.
"Who might you be?" I didn't really need to ask when I thought about it, there wouldn't be many human barbarians wandering around the Void. By my reckoning, there ought to have been only one, and my initial impressions of him certainly did little to sway my prejudice.

He smelled like sweat and blood and had a crazed look in his eyes. I met his haughty stare with a defiance of my own, not bothering to conceal my abject hatred of him. When he spoke his voice was like iron nails being raked across thick gravel. "I have been known by many names, but the only one that matters now is the Bane of Kree. That is the name I was known by when I wielded power over men."

Is that what you call the meaningless slaughter of thousands of innocents? I don't call that power, I call that cowardice. My hatred and utter lack of respect showed through in my words in the form of extreme sarcasm, "So, do I just call you 'Bane'? Or would you prefer 'Mr. Kree'?" Virgil gasped audibly behind me.

In a fraction of a second his sword was in his hand, the tip of the blade inches from my throat. The anger in his voice was barely contained, "Do not mock me. It will be your last mistake." By the look on his face I could swear he toed the line between crazy and just plain violent. Perhaps it was a bit of both.

I glanced down at his blade disinterestedly, grabbing the edge with my thickly-gauntleted hands and shoving it off to the side. *Threatening me just might be YOUR last mistake, cretin.* "What were we talking about, again?" I refused to be intimidated by such lowly scum. He smiles slightly, and sheathes his sword.
"I like a woman of courage. Not many could face my sword without sniveling for my mercy."

Well I don't especially like you... but I've never been one to pass up an opportunity for a story in the past. "Tell me, how did you come by your name?"

His eyes took on a far-away cast as he recalled the memories he held so fondly. There was a disgusting pride in his voice at the incorrigible

actions of his past. "Kree was where I forced the world to respect my power. No one had ever breached the great walls of Kree, but my horde swarmed over them as if they were but a mirage! I held the fate of every man, woman, and child in my hand, and showed them no mercy." His eyes, already distant, glazed over completely as he savored that moment of 'glory'. "If only I could return to Arcanum..."

Ugh... no... no, I cannot accept help from a man like this. I don't care how desperate I am, I just can't. "Is that when you were using the Bangellian Scourge?" It seemed as though the blade had never had a more fitting owner. Even Pete didn't hold a candle to the Bane of Kree.

His attention snapped back into focus and he glared at me with sheer disbelief, "You know of the Scourge?"

I snorted, glaring at him with utter contempt, "I destroyed it."

"Nooooo! Not my beloved Scourge! Die, worm!"

His sword sprung forth again, but I was ready for it. Kryggird's Falchion flashed through the air with unparalleled speed, knocking the Bane of Kree's own blade from his hand before he even realized I carried a blade of my own. My second strike sliced across his legs, sending him crumpling to his knees in the sheer, sudden pain. I twirled around him deftly, landing a third strike straight on the bastard's neck. His head was neatly severed, slowly sliding off onto the ground even as the rest of his body slumped forwards with a wed thud. Arronax scoffed at me, "Well, that certainly could've gone better. We could have used his help, you know."

I shook my head, fetching the dropped sword from the ground, feeling the strange itch on my skin as I approached it, and passing it off to Virgil. "I don't need the help of a man like that. Never. We'll just have to make due with the other two." Virgil swung the sword a few times to get a feel for it, then stowed it in his pack in preference of the axe I made him, glancing at me with a shrug.

Arronax scoffed, "Well, I'm glad one of us is confident." *Please. Who's the one that refuses to use the perfectly good weapon I gave him?* "Just don't mess up the other two. We really do need all the help we can get. Kerghan has grown unimaginably powerful since he was sent

here. You've no idea what we're up against."

"Your opinion is noted, Arronax." I brushed him off rudely, stepping onto the teleporter to the next landmass. As soon as I warped to the next landmass I was hit by a horrid stench like rotting meat. I covered my nose with my arm and glanced around, noting that my initial perception was spot on. There were dozens of lizard corpses littering the ground everywhere the eye could see, most of them ripped apart and obviously chewed on. If the smell didn't gag me, the sight certainly would have.

Lumbering around the platform was a pale-looking demon creature. It stood at least twice as tall as I and glared about the area hungrily, sniffing in every direction. As it looked towards me I could see and hear it sniffing exceptionally loudly before it finally lumbered over to me.

"Ugh... me Gorgoth... Gorgoth need food..."

No, really? Here, in the Void? "Gorgoth? You mean THE Gorgoth? What a small world!" I simply couldn't hold back my sarcasm. I knew it was rude of me, but it wasn't exactly like the beast in front of me was the model of polite society.

He shoved his face near mine and sniffed in deeply, which at that range was practically deafening. "Uggh... Gorgoth hungry..." I didn't suspect he actually heard a damn thing I was saying.

"Uh... of course you are, my good man..." *Now, now... I've got to try... reasoning with him...? Somehow... Gods, this is madness.* "Have you a moment?"

The only response I got was much in the same vein as the same one I got before. He sniffed at me quite deeply for a second time, "Gorgoth eat you, lady... look good!"

No eat Samantha... Samantha pointy! "That's no good. Listen, I'm here to defeat Kerghan."

He started screaming at the top of his lungs and flailing about harmlessly. It was like watching a child throw a tantrum, if that child

happened to be absurdly huge and amazingly ugly. "What? Gorgoth no care about Kerghan! NEED FOOD! FOOD! Little woman taste good!"

I've really begun to have enough of this. How can anybody expect me to put up with this even for five minutes, let alone long enough to drag this bastard's hide all the way to Kerghan? "You'd best learn to control your appetite, monster..." I drew my blade menacingly, staring at him. "Gorgoth eat! Eat you! Kill! Kill! Kill!"

"That's it, Gorgoth. You've eaten your last meal..." Perhaps it was the horrid stench hanging in the air that had put me in such a foul mood, but I had no patience left for dealing with his rather uncommon eccentricity. I swiped my blade at him threateningly, drawing just a touch of blood where the blade had swiped past his skin. *Now do you understand what you're dealing with?*

He went into a childish rage like I've never seen before. "Food! Eat! Blood! Kill! I EAT YOU LADY!" *I don't plan on winding up as a meal for you or anybody.* Whereas my first strike had been only a threat, my second wasn't so kind. I sliced him neatly across his midsection, blood and half-digested, rotting meat spilling out unceremoniously. I nearly vomited then and there, but I had the presence of mind to first dodge behind the bastard and plant my blade firmly at the base of his neck, putting him out of his misery. When I was sure he hadn't survived the experience I darted to the edge of the landmass and heaved off of it, wondering grimly just where it would all fall off to.

Arronax gave me a none-too-pleased glare when I stood back up. "That's two out of three that you've killed, now, madam. Are you planning on actually enlisting the help of the third one or would you like me to just char him to a crisp the moment we lay eyes on him?"

I grumbled under my breath, "All right, your point is well taken. I promise you I won't kill..." *Who's the last one again? Oh, god, no... not him...* I continued speaking through gritted teeth. "I promise you I won't kill Kraka-tur, no matter how badly he's bound to make me want to kill him."

Arronax sighed, walking towards the portal. "Well, let us be off then. I'm sure he's just around the corner." I followed along, stepping

through the teleporter and onto the landmass beyond.

Much like the platform where I'd found the Bane of Kree, that particular platform was devoid of any lizards, floating jellyfish, or any kind of life. Aside, of course, from the strange dragonlike beast lumbering about it pointlessly. I spied him on the far side of a tree before he disappeared behind it. Walking forwards toward the tree I saw him come just into view before quickly slipping out of my sight again.

Curious, and more than a little bit annoyed, I rounded the tree only to see he wasn't there. I took several steps around the tree, slowly moving faster and faster, occasionally catching a glimpse of the edge of a crimson wing. Finally the bastard turned around and screamed at me, "Who dares disturb the mighty Kraka-tur?!"

I coughed gently, trying to keep my foul temper in check. "I suppose that would be me... dreadfully sorry about that..."

He inflated his chest, spreading his wings out at their full length and holding his claws open to the air menacingly, "Sorry? SORRY? Do you have any idea the powers I can bring to bear against you? The wrath of Kraka-tur knows no bounds!" *Sure it does. I've read your bloody journal, you simpering coward.*

Sighing deeply, I spoke through clenched teeth, trying desperately not to offend him. *Are you happy now, Arronax? Do you bloody enjoy watching me do this?* "I'm very sure. Perhaps I could ask you to tell me a bit about yourself, oh mighty one?"

"What do you want to know about the fearsome Kraka-tur?"

So far so good, I guess, in that I haven't quite killed him yet. Not for lack of desire, either. "Tell me about your life in Arcanum..."

He once again struck a menacing pose, proudly boasting about himself. I'd suspected he would jump at such an opportunity, and I was quite completely correct. "My life in Arcanum was millenia ago! Such are the lives of gods! But, I will tell you... once I was a mere mortal, just as you are. I lived in a small village where I was ridiculed and belittled, just for being different! Granted, I may not have always

been the easiest person to live with, but isn't that the way of strong men? I was a visionary, and I was scorned because of it..."

I wanted to impale him where he stood just listening to his ridiculous lies, but I simply listened quietly, patiently, trying desperately to avoid killing off the last remaining creature I could ask for help in defeating Kerghan. "So, I was out adventuring... as I was prone to do... and I happened across an old temple in the mountains. There I found an old scroll which described a spell so powerful, so horrible, that I still believe it was hidden away on purpose. Before me, there had been no man in the history of Arcanum who could have handled such old and powerful magick!" *I can defeat Kerghan without his help, can't I? Please? Ugh.*

"This scroll described a spell to transform a man into a terrible dragon-beast."

He gestures to himself.

"All it required was the right words and a drop of dragon's blood. As you can probably guess, dragon's blood is usually in fairly short supply..."

You know, I do believe I have a copy of this story without all of the bloody embellishment. "The last dragon in Arcanum was Bellerogrim... the mightiest, most fearsome creature who walked the land. And so I went straight to his lair, and battled him to the death in order to get a single drop of blood! It was a ferocious battle, but in the end, I was victorious. Even as a mortal man, I was very, very brave and powerful..."

I had to actively hold back my laughter so as not to accidentally offend the poor sod. *Does he really think anybody would believe such bunk?* "And so... with the blood of Bellerogrim the dragon, I used the scroll and became the evil and destructive Kraka-tur! Mighty Kraka-tur! Pillager of cities, devourer of women and children! And Kraka-tur roars with-!"

"I think I understand," I cut him off abruptly, rapidly tiring of his excessive bluster. "How did you get sent here?" *Why do I even ask these things? Do I hate myself that badly?*

"I was sent here only by the efforts of the powerful Elven Council, led by Nasrudin himself! There was a colossal battle between us, and

only through sheer force of their numbers did they finally subdue the mighty Kraka-tur! Nasrudin hid like a coward while his minions died by the thousands...! I was banished, but never defeated! I am Kraka-tur!"

"Right." *Gods, just stop talking. You're not fooling anybody, you know.*

"What have you been doing over here in the Void?" I thought that perhaps if I asked him about something in the present instead of the past his obviously warped mind might not embellish it so. I could be quite naive sometimes.

He twirled around flamboyantly, flapping his wings and baring his long row of teeth. "I've been spreading terror here, as I did in Arcanum! Look around you! This is the valley of death! No one has survived the fury of Kraka-tur!"

I'm sure the others stay away for a good reason... probably so they don't have to listen to you talking. "Let's talk about something else, shall we? What's your opinion of Kerghan the Terrible?"

"Kerghan?"

The massive creature in front of me seems to cringe.

"Wh... what do you mean? What do you want with Kerghan?"

You have got to be kidding me. It seemed like excessive flattery would be necessary to enlist the bastard's help. I only had to hope he wouldn't run at the first sight of trouble. "I'm looking to destroy him. I need the help of the mighty Kraka-tur!"

He looked at me with an obviously scared glance. "Hmmm. Perhaps. What exactly is going on?" I was shocked no small amount that the cowardly bastard in front of me might well have been more reasonable than Gorgoth and the Bane of Kree combined.

"It's difficult to figure out where to start, but the short of it is that Kerghan is attempting to return to Arcanum. He is a madman that wants to bring an end to the world... surely you can't allow his name to be sung higher than your own, now can you?" I winked slyly at him.

He flashed me a toothy grin as he began to understand my meaning, rearing up to his full height as his nostrils began to steam. "I see. So!

You ask the terrible Kraka-tur for his help in battling evil Kerghan! Fight fire with fire! I shall destroy that bumbling necromancer with a great sweep of my claw! His blood will flow as mighty Kraka-tur passes his judgment! All will cower before the power of Kraka-tur!"

I couldn't help but sigh impatiently. "So... you will help me?" *Please, let's just get the hell out of here and get on with it already.*

"Well, now, let's not rush into things... I mean, this is Kerghan the Terrible we're talking about. Not that I will have any trouble dispatching him, of course! For I am Kraka-tur! The ruination of past, present and future! The...!"

"Yes, please!" *SHUT... UP! Mustn't... kill you... need the extra help... arrgh, why do you have to be so damned difficult?!* "What are you saying?"

For once he gave me a level stare. "Kraka-tur expects payment for his services! Did you think I would come to your rescue without some sort of offering? You must pay your respects! Kraka-tur exacts a heavy toll! Entire villages have been sacrificed to appease me! For I am-!"

"Yes, yes, I know already!" I flipped the Eye of Kraka-tur around in my purse idly, noting that the creature in front of me had both eyes. *Well, so much for that.* Instead I pulled out the journal of his that I'd uncovered so long ago. *I suppose I won't be able to share this with Frederick after all... not that I've only just figured that out now...* "Well, perhaps I could give you this journal back..."

Suddenly his eyes took on a rather nervous look, "Wha...? My journal? You mean my last testament? Where did you get that?"

I've got you now. "You left it behind in the Lair of Bellerogrim, all the way at the bottom..."

"That was still in the lair of Bellerogrim after all these years! Wait! I don't quite remember what I wrote... That was the eve before my glorious battle against Nasrudin and the Elven Council! What a great battle it was!"

I've just got to be nice a short while longer... I'm almost there...! "Yes, I'm sure. So will you join me if I return it to you...?"

When he wasn't trying to be intimidating he actually shrunk down to quite a pathetic sight. "Hmmm. So you'll give me back the journal, and I'll help you to defeat him? Could you, uh, make sure never to tell anyone what you read in there...? Not that I fear anything or anyone! Kraka-tur is like the moon and the sun! Timeless and terrible! I will desecrate all-!"

"Yes, yes, I get the point. So will you join me or not?" *I can't possibly describe just how much I hate you, but if it sees Kerghan dead, than I suppose I can endure. At least I didn't try taking Gorgoth with me... ugh.*

"Yes! And you WILL need my help in defeating him! He will fall before our combined might! Or, perhaps you will not even need the strength of mighty Kraka-tur! Uh... perhaps I will only watch as you dispose of the cretin! In fact, perhaps I will watch the front door while you battle him to the death! For I am Kraka-tur, the...!"

"Oh, good god." *JUST SHUT UP!* "Let's go..." I was terribly thankful to not have anything else left, save for breaking into the castle of Kerghan himself. I stepped on the teleporter to the next landmass, glancing behind me carefully to make certain that Kraka-tur wasn't backing out of our little bargain. Somewhat to my surprise, he actually was following along.

The teleporter seemed to lead to the very same landmass I'd first arrived on, and I stared uncomfortably at the Void-side Ring of Brodgar for several moments. *Just on the other side of that, Nasrudin's...* I breathed in deeply, pressing on towards the other teleporter in the area. Somewhat predictably, that took me back to Arronax's prison and from there it was trivial to make my way the rest of the way to Kerghan's castle.

The spectral guardians standing on either side of the gateway into the castle glared at me hatefully as I approached, hands on their ghostly swords.

"What? You've brought the enemies of the master to his very door! You will pay for this outrage!"

Kryggird's Falchion was off of my belt even as I started to speak. "Not before you do..." The first guardian slumped to the ground almost before he could hear the words I was saying. I turned just in time to parry the sword strike of the guardian behind me, and Arronax jolted

him into oblivion mere moments later.

"Hoho! Nicely done!" Kraka-tur chattered on behind me as I pushed open the gate and entered the castle. "Of course, the great Kraka-tur could have dispatched them much more quickly! But! There is no need! For the terrible Kraka-tur must-!"

"Do me a favor, good fellow, and please put a lid on it!" *Thank you, Franklin. If you didn't say it I would have.*

He seemed almost offended, at least as far as I could tell through his incessant boasting. "Hey, now, there's no need to be rude... I mean... don't think that just because the fearsome Kraka-tur has agreed to help you that he won't rend you from limb to limb if you dare speak to him in such a manner ever again! You're just-!"

"He means it," Arronax cut him off, "Shut the hell up already or you're really going to make me mad."

Kraka-tur shrunk down and cowered into a ball, slowly waddling along behind us, "Yes, yes, of course A-Arronax... I didn't mean to... I mean... So be it! I will do you this favor this one time only, but you are lucky you have caught the legendary Kraka-tur in a generous mood! If not, you would..."

Having learned our lessons quite quickly, the rest of us ignored Kraka-tur's incessant babbling and just let him cower behind the rest of the group as we explored the castle. The architecture of the place was not significantly different than Arronax's prison chamber had been, so I suspected it existed long before Kerghan had come to this place. Not far inside I found a small, circular ring that emanated magickal energy similar to a number of things in Tulla. Cautiously, I stepped into it and was immediately teleported to a different area.

Enough with all the bloody teleportation already... how many times must it feel like my stomach is being removed from my body? I was greeted by two more ghostly guardians as soon as I teleported into the next room, but they were lying dead on the ground by the time anybody even followed after me. In the next room I could see a great big machine and I wandered in awe towards it.

Kerghan sure does love his plated guardians, doesn't he? Several more of the spectral bastards set upon me as I entered the room. "Kraka-tur will guard the doorway to, uh, make sure none of them escape! Great and terrible Kraka-tur will look on to make sure you are worthy to travel with him!" *SHUT UP.*

Somewhat tougher than the previous champions I'd faced, my first several strikes were parried before I managed to score even a single solid hit on the warrior I fought with. Soon enough I managed to slip past his guard and strike him down quickly thereafter, but the other warriors in the room were already on me.

Terry came to my rescue, grabbing the nearest warrior by the ankle, much to his surprise. Virgil came charging in bravely, his axe striking a flaming arc throughout the air before coming down on the specter's helmet. The helmet cracked and broke and, with nothing beneath, the dark ghost in front of me fell to the ground. *Thanks, Virgil...* It had been so long since Virgil actually fought right by my side that I had almost forgotten what it was like. It was a nice feeling, somehow safe even though I knew his skill with a weapon didn't compare to my own.

The other ghosts in the room were already dispatched by the time I could turn my attention to them, and from the intense, burning smell I couldn't tell exactly who was responsible for it. Truly, it could've been any of them, but in the end it didn't much matter. I gazed at the portal creation machine in front of me curiously, but it was far beyond my comprehension. I couldn't even begin to fathom what could make such a thing work.

Passing it by for the time being in favor of more important things, I stepped through another teleporter and into what looked like an obvious prison. I walked down the corridors of the prison, staring into each of the expansive bunker-like cells, hoping to find some remnants of the Black Mountain Clan. All I could see throughout the several cells were corpses... dwarven corpses. At last I came upon a cell with a small handful of dwarves still alive inside. I deftly picked the lock and opened the door, rushing through to speak with them. "Someone from the other side has come!"

They're here...! They're really here! Gods, look at them... what they must have been through... what Kerghan's done to them... "Who are you, good dwarf?"

He bowed to me slightly, "I am Grenjar Silver Hammer. Tell me, did Stennar reach you?" I could still scarcely believe it. Truly, everything had started when I met Stennar on that horrible day....

Stennar... Gods, I had no idea at the time... you tried to tell me... "Yes, but he died before he could tell me what was happening."

Grenjar stared at the ground solemnly. "Stennar." Several moments passed while he silently grieved for his lost brother. I wanted to apologize, but there was nothing to apologize over. Indeed, if Stennar hadn't told me what he did I would never have come to rescue the Black Mountain Clan. I left Grenjar to his grief until he felt comfortable speaking again. "How did he die?"

I tried to spare him the grisly details of the murder, instead being very vague about the whole thing. "He perished in a horrible zeppelin crash."

"A zeppelin? What is that?"

Er, right... I suppose I'd almost forgotten about that. This poor bastard has been trapped here more than twice as long as I've been alive. "It's an airship. A boat that flies, suspended under a large balloon."

He gasped at me audibly, which was an impressive way for a dwarf to react when describing technology to him. "What? I've never heard such a thing! How is this possible?" *Oh, Grenjar... you've been away for so long...*

"The world has changed greatly since you've been there." I hated having to be the one to give him news like that. It simply wasn't fair, he'd done nothing... just an unfortunate victim of Kerghan and his trickery with the Dark Elves. *...and now so many of them are dead... there are hardly any left...*

Grenjar seemed angry, then, and I couldn't really blame him. "No

doubt driven by dwarven ingenuity and technological advances!" If I were in his situation, I, too, would be bitter regarding what had happened with Bates.

"Uh... yes, you're right." I wasn't going to try and hide it in the slightest. He had every right to be angry with Bates, and possibly with humanity as a whole.

"If only we had been there to see it. But fate had other ideas..."

Fate... I suppose that's one way to put it. "Can you tell me about what happened?" I needed to hear their story with my own ears, directly from them... I'd spent so much time picking up the pieces of their story that I just had to hear it the way they would tell it.

He shook his head sadly, remembering, but willing to share despite that. "The dark elves had been lying in wait, looking for a way to bring some dwarves over to this side. They knew that technology would eventually weaken the wards to the point of failure, but they decided to accelerate the process. They needed a machine to open the rift back up by distorting the already weakened wards. An elf couldn't make a machine to save his life..."

I followed along, almost as sadly as Grenjar himself. I truly pitied them, I knew what it was like when the fickle force known as fate had other plans in mind for one's life. "And then Bates made his steam engine..."

He nodded, "Exactly. Somehow, they convinced King Loghaire to banish us." *...and he would pay for that decision, too, as would all dwarves... so much damage at the hands of the dark elves, at the behest of Kerghan...* My resolve grew even stronger as Grenjar continued speaking. "We were shocked, to say the least... but our king had spoken. We were told our banishment was to the Isle of Despair, but this is where we ended up. We can only assume our king knew nothing of their true intent."

That would be a fairly correct assumption. Boy was he ever surprised when I told him you weren't on the Isle of Despair... surprised, and naked. "I don't believe he did." I had the most odd memories of dwarves. "As soon as we arrived here we were beaten mercilessly and thrown

in chains. As our work progressed on the gate, Stennar formulated a plan. As soon as the gate had any functionality, he would go through and attempt to warn the other side. We knew that his absence would be noticed, and that they would try to stop him."

I knew all about what had happened to Stennar after he'd escaped, and at last I could hear how his final journey truly began. "Please, go on."

He began preparations to disguise himself as a gnome. He starved himself to the point of sickness, and when the gate was near readiness, he... he shaved his beard. He believed that the full responsibility for what had befallen us was his... he would do whatever he thought was necessary to make things right. Even that.

They tortured some of the clan to force us to reveal his plans, but we wouldn't break. We knew they needed us to finish the gate, and, heh heh, we had been disabling the gate in various ways for months. For all they knew, we still had months ahead of us to finish the thing, when we could have been finished months before.

Finally, they killed half of the clan in a last effort to force us to talk. We still did not break. And now, we are all that is left of our once great clan.

A quiet rage washed over me as he recounted the story, explained the reasoning for the number of dwarf corpses in the other cells. *Still, despite all that, they wouldn't talk... and the Hand found and killed Stennar anyhow...* I stared Grenjar in the eyes with furious resolve, "I will return to free you when I have killed those responsible." Without waiting for a response, I stormed off down the hall.

My way forward was blocked by a phalanx of four dark guardians, with a fifth brazenly charging ahead of his allies to try and take me on by himself. That lone guardian fell in no more than three swift strikes and I was already marching on the phalanx ahead. They held their formation until Arronax's fireball scattered them by force, slamming them up against the walls on the sides of the hall. Kryggird's Falchion sung, a high-pitched wailing noise, as it sailed through the air. I wasn't taking any chances and I neatly decapitated all four of them without pausing for even a second as I walked past.

The hallway turned back on itself as I continued on, expanding soon after into a room almost as wide and tall as the gargantuan chamber Arronax had been imprisoned in. Standing in a menacing formation along both walls were groups of Kerghan's strongest guardians, wielding massive greatswords and covered in blood-tinged armor. The room was lit only by a bright, magickal brazier flickering in the center of the room. As soon as the ghostly guardians noticed my presense they made to stop me. *This is it... the last battle before I fight Kerghan.*

I dashed forwards, cutting the first of the spectral knights to ribbons right where he stood. His ghastly, tortured wail filled the room as the damned spirit that gave him life was finally released into the great beyond. I didn't stop there, I charged into a pair of the knights swinging my lighter-than-air blade recklessly as I approached. I wounded one of them grievously, but the other nearly took off my arm with his great sword in response. While I was momentarily stunned, the knight I had been attacking regained his composure and impaled me on his greatsword in response.

I cried out in pain, feeling the blood spill out of me and run down that haunting, spectral blade. My grip on Kryggird's Falchion loosened and had it not been for its absurdly light weight I would have dropped it completely. Out of nowhere, Terry came sailing through the air and he bit into the spectral knight's neck. I could hear his unearthly, shocked gasp as Terry gnawed fully through the armor. He stumbled backwards, taking his sword with him and allowing me to drop peacefully to the ground.

Virgil dashed forward, his axe parrying the other knight's sword just in time. I stood up weakly, feeling the wound in my side. I could feel Velorien's blessing holding me together, somehow giving me the strength to continue fighting. The echo of rapid gunfire filled the room and the knight that Terry had been paralyzing at last fell to the ground. I swung my blade in a high, upward arc and instantly decapitated the remaining knight.

From across the room I could see a fourth knight begin to charge, but he stopped quite suddenly with a look of horror in his eyes. I could hear his spectral groan begin to issue forth and he slowly dropped to

his knees. At last he cried out one last gasp of pain and collapsed onto the floor along with the rest. Out of the corner of my eye I saw Arronax's hand lower back to his side and I decided I'd rather not know exactly what just happened.

Finally, through the door at the end of that long room, I found the last teleporter. I stared at it nervously, feeling the tightness in my chest grow. Arronax stood next to me, also staring, "You can feel it, can you not? There is no doubt... Kerghan is through that portal."

I nodded at him, "Yes, even I can feel it... there's no mistaking that dark power... the very same I felt on the plains of Morbihan." *At last, it has come to this... Kerghan, I will destroy you.*

Chapter the Seventieth: Foolish Indulgence

I stared at the portal for what seemed like hours, almost unwilling to force myself to go through it. *Am I truly ready? Can I face Kerghan? Whether I can or can't... this is it... this is the end.* I breathed a heavy sigh, unable to calm my nerves. I stepped near the portal, closing my eyes and letting my mind wander, hoping to find some thought to comfort me in my time of need.

Like so many times before, I felt the familiar sensation of teleportation washing over my body, that peculiar lurch in my stomach that told me I was being transported to a distant locale. I could hear a voice, both in and out of my head, dark and deep and terrible. It echoed throughout my soul and chilled me straight to the bone, like the sound of thousands of tortured and damned spirits given voice and form. Standing in front of me was that same, robed figure I had met years before when I was only just searching out the Wheel clan. I would recognize it anywhere.

"Greetings. Long have I waited for your arrival, and finally this moment has come. I am Kerghan, first of the necromancers, voyager in the lands of the dead."

"I see." Anger flared in my eyes, alongside abject hatred. I wanted to strike out at the bizarre, twisted abomination in front of me, half-living and half-dead. The only thing that stopped me was fear. I could feel the power coming off of him in waves; it intimidated me. *I can't... how can I fight this...?* "Not exactly the person I originally expected..."

He stared at me intently for several moments and then passed his gaze over the whole of my group of companions before finally returning to focus on me once again. "I would think not, although the presence of Arronax tells me you already know much of my tale. At least as much as he deemed necessary in order to bring you into his confidence..."

I despised Kerghan's manner of speaking. Not only his voice, but his attitude, that constant air that he knew something I did not. He was even worse than Arronax, and twice as imposing. *I've got to be brave... I can't back down now...* "He told me enough. I've come to put an end to your madness..."

He laughs, an eerie sound, laced with the tormented cries of the half-dead, the echoes of places both impious and profane.

"Powerful you are, very powerful. But remember the lesson once taught you. Remember that, and listen to the words I have to say..."

I've grown far more than you ever could have anticipated since we last met... you've no idea... "Very well, but your time is short. These words will be your elegy." I knew I was only delaying the inevitable with my false bravado, but I just couldn't bring myself to strike out at him, not yet... it was all I could do to avoid shaking from the intense fear I felt as I faced him. *Damnation! I've got to pull myself together! I can't back out now!*

"I can sense your fear, traveler, I can feel the emotions boiling just underneath the surface." His laughing dimmed down to a dark chuckle, "I walk both the lands of the living and the dead... you know what death is like, you have not been able to forget... there is nothing that you can hide from me."

If I had been afraid before then I truly became frightened when I heard that. It was entirely possible for him to truly exist in a state between life and death and, if so, I would be an open book to him. Just as Frederick and I could feel and understand each other so intensely in those scant few moments between my death and my resurrection, so could Kerghan feel and interpret my every thought and action. "Yes... I will not try and hide it... I am afraid. That does not mean I will hesitate in striking you down when that time comes."

"That would be most unfortunate," he taunted me, "if something were to happen to me, the spirit of your son would spend the rest of eternity writhing in the endless torment of undeath." His gaze pierced me straight through and, overcoming my fear, I felt sadness and horror.

No... how could you? Even from across the Void... you son of a bitch! I swallowed hard, trying to hold back the tears in my eyes and failing. "H-how...? Why? What purpose does that serve?"

His voice softened almost to a whisper and he beckoned me, taunted me further, "It has stayed your hand, has it not? I've been following your progress for some time and I will stop at nothing to get what I want. I hold your son's fate in the palm of my hand... it would be regrettable if you chose to disobey me..."

Virgil sighed deeply, placing a hand on my shoulder even as I slowly sank to my knees, doubt assaulting my mind. "What? What is it? What do you want?" *I have to at least hear him out, for Nathaniel's sake... Gods, Nathaniel, I'm so sorry... I don't know if I can do anything for you.*

"Death." He let the word hang in the air for several moments before continuing. "I tire of life, tire of the pointless pain that it brings, tire of this endless existence with no purpose... I will return to Arcanum and bring an end to it all. You will help me, and when it is done your son can finally be granted the respite of death along with the rest." I wanted to cry out in agony and despair, and Kerghan could see it in my eyes, feel it in my soul... he knew everything about me.

"I see your soul, traveler. It is weary, tattered and spent. Do you feel its pull? Do you hear its whisper? It is within my power to calm these waters, and that is what I shall do."

He's got me right where he wants me... I can't make this decision. If I kill him, Nathaniel will... no, I can't do that to my son. ...but the alternative... I can't turn my back on the rest of Arcanum either. Everybody's counting on me. What's my happiness compared to the lives of thousands? Of course my soul screams out in pain! No matter what I do, I will either betray my son, or betray the world... and in each case, I will also betray myself. "I suppose that's a different sort of way to look at things..." Different was hardly the proper word to use, but in my anguish I could hardly even think straight.

I felt Virgil's hand on my shoulder squeezing gently and he whispered in my ear, "Hold on a moment... might I speak with you?"

Nodding, I looked up at him with teary eyes. As much as I'd rejected the safety of his embrace in the past, now I longed for it. I felt so lost, so unsure... all I wanted was the simple comfort of knowing what to do, knowing I was doing the right thing. "Of course, Virgil..."

He sighed, looking at me with uncertainty in his eyes, "I know this must be very painful for you... I-I wanted to help you before it all came to this... but looking back, I guess you were right. There's nothing you could have done, and now here we are." He sighed, knowing he was tripping over his own words and making things sound even worse than they did already. "Look, I just want to say... I know you don't have an easy decision ahead of you, but please try to think of the rest of us... of all the people we met on our journey."

I didn't want to believe what I was hearing. It felt like Virgil was turning his back on me after everything, after all the offers of help he suddenly turned around and told me he didn't care how much I suffered. I realized that I only felt that way because I so desperately wanted to give in to Kerghan, but I couldn't. Virgil was doing a poor job of comforting me. "Are you saying I should just abandon my son to an eternity of torment? To go on living, knowing that he'll never be allowed to rest, and that it's all my fault? I don't think I can live with that pain, Virgil... my life has been nothing but pain. Would you really try and stop me if I decided I didn't want to live like that?" Virgil gives me a hard look.

"Of course not. I made my choice a long time ago, and I choose to stand with you. Yes, there is pain in life—pain and loss and sorrow. But there is also joy, and the pleasures of growing and learning. You can't have one without the other, and I wouldn't want to sacrifice either. But make no mistake, I stand with you, whatever your choice." I felt a burst of confidence at Virgil's support... perhaps, with him by my side, the pain of guilt could somehow be more bearable. "Thank you, Virgil. As for you, Kerghan..."

When I stared at him, the words caught in my mouth... I longed to say them, to tell him that I wouldn't be his bloody puppet, but I couldn't do it. No matter which decision I picked, the words just wouldn't come out of my mouth. Kerghan took that opportunity to taunt me further, to make it even harder for me to choose against him. "I can feel the pain in your heart, Samantha Colburn... the pain

that has always been there, from the very day you were born, screaming, into this world. It is the same for all people, for all creatures... never ending pain for as long as they should live. Don't you want to put an end to their suffering? Don't you want to bring them - and your son - eternal peace?"

Yes... yes, I have suffered... so many people have suffered. From Kings like Loghaire and millionaires like Bates... all the way down to lowly prostitutes, kidnapped and forced to endure rape by ogres... but does that give me the right to choose whether or not their lives are worth living? "Do you truly know that for certain? That everybody would be happier if I helped you do this...? Can that really bring them peace?" Even as I thought it I knew it was true, remembering just how peaceful my own death had been, but it just wasn't right to force such a thing on all of humanity. Arronax stared at me angrily, refusing to accept that I was even considering Kerghan's offer..

"I cannot believe what I am hearing. You would willingly throw away the lives of everyone you have ever known?"

I looked at him with uncertainty in my eyes, seeking a confident resolve no matter which side I chose to stand on. "Look at your life - pain, agony, suffering. He's offering peace." *Peace for you, for me, for Nathaniel... for everybody. I want to release my son, to spend the rest of eternity with Frederick... Gods, could I really go through with such a thing?*

He growled at me, refusing to back down. I couldn't particularly blame him, either. If I had never tasted death's sweet embrace I might never have longed for it, never somehow grown to believe that it was an acceptable solution to the world's problems. Arronax continued arguing against me stubbornly, and I was happy for the help in clarifying my thoughts, "I might choose a different path if I had my life to live again, but I wouldn't trade the life I had for non-existence. It is how we deal with our pain that defines who we are. Life is a privilege, and it is not to be thrown away lightly!"

No, death is not non-existence... you're wrong. Good heavens, I can't believe what I'm thinking. I never asked to make a decision like this, I'm too weak... all I've ever wanted was freedom from my pain. That's the whole reason I ran away in the first place. "But we all end up dead, eventually. Why suffer needlessly?" I could feel myself starting to

give in, to seek relief from the pain and guilt I had felt for so long. Arronax wasn't having any of it.

"How can you be so certain our suffering is pointless? Do you have some intimate knowledge of the master design of creation the rest of us are unaware of? And you are correct—we all end up dead eventually. But the life we have is so short compared to the eternity we are dead; why would you rush headlong into oblivion? If anything is certain at all, it is the eventuality of death."

I detested the finality of Arronax's statements, his arrogance still manifesting itself in everything he said. "You won't even entertain the idea that he might be right?" If I could have I would've continued the discussion for an eternity, slowly picking away all of my remaining doubts. All I knew for sure was that death truly had been a blessing to me, and being brought back to life was a horrible pain, being torn away from Frederick even as I tried desperately to cling to him... there was no argument Arronax could present which would somehow erase that from my memory.

He shook his head decisively, crossing his arms to make clear how firm his position was, "I don't need to. I know he is wrong, and I have had enough of this discussion. It is time for you to make your decision - whose side are you on?"

I had never been the hero that anybody tried making me out to be. I'd always known, right from the beginning, that fate had chosen her champion poorly. *Deep down, I know you're right... I know that what I am doing is wrong... but if I had to make this decision a thousand times over, each time I would make it the same way. Frederick, I'm coming home.* "I must side with Kerghan."

I closed my eyes and flinched away from the angered shouts I received from my comrades. "Traitor!" "Then it will be death for you!" "You will die for this!" *We've traveled together for so long... can none of you understand?* I heard Franklin and Vollinger cocking their guns, preparing to fire on me. Arronax began to radiate an intense magickal energy as he whirled his hands about.

At last, I heard Virgil's voice... soft, sad, and regretful. "Samantha... after all we've been through together, I care for you deeply... perhaps more deeply than you'll ever know. That's why I can't let you do this.

I'm sorry, but in the end... perhaps, by standing against you, I will be doing you a favor. Goodbye, Samantha."

NO! You promised! You said you would stand with me no matter what I chose! Why, Virgil...? How could you do this to me? I can tolerate the others, but not you. I weakly lifted up my blade, staring at my angered companions through tear-filled eyes. From down by my feet I could hear a ferocious growling, and I could feel Terry nuzzling up against my leg protectively. I heard another gun cocking nearby, followed by Sebastian's voice, "I know better than to stand against you, or Terry. I trust you both... even if that means I'll be right alongside you, helping Kerghan destroy the world. Just promise me one thing... when we get to Willoughbsby, you'll let me pull the trigger."

Although I couldn't so much as force a smile, I did nod my head at him, "It's a promise, Sebastian. Willoughbsby's all yours... but Bates is all mine." He grinned and chuckled darkly, aiming his gun and firing the shot that would start the most difficult battle I ever faced. It wasn't that I feared defeat, or even death... far from it. What I feared most was success. There was nothing I wanted less than to have to fight the very people I'd called friends for several years, to have to finish them off with my own two hands. *Why did it have to come to this? Virgil, you can still change your mind...*

Vollinger's gun went off at point blank range, his bullet piercing my leg and penetrating deeply into my flesh. I winced in pain, betrayed for a second time from one I had called friend. *Is this the thanks I get for trusting you, even after everything? No, that's not fair... I can't expect you to side with Kerghan. I know too much about the Hand to expect that... and I really can't blame you for fighting against my foolish indulgence.*

I forgave you, Vollinger... for spying on me, for being a member of the Hand. I forgive you still, for not standing by me... even for trying to kill me. I'm sorry it had to come to this, but you leave me no choice.

Kryggird's Falchion had made short work of the the most horrible beasts in existence and it certainly had no problem doing the same to a single, unarmored gnome. The blade flashed through the air like lightning, nearly half of Vollinger's body being forcefully removed as

it passed. Several seconds passed by silently before blood started seeping out of the mortal wound and, at last, Vollinger fell to the ground... dead. *Goodbye, Vollinger... I'll be joining you soon.*

As Vollinger's blood spread out on the rough, stone floor beneath, I was finally struck by Arronax's spell. I could tell it had been cast with a weakness of will, a haste that detracted from its potential power. The primary force of the strike was absorbed by my technological shield, the electrodes on the front fizzling out from the terrible overload. What little remained spilled around the edges of the shield, scorching my skin and making me sweat. When the flames settled and I still stared at Arronax through the thick cloud of smoke, he gave me a look of terrible dread.

I twirled around expertly, Kryggird's Falchion sailing through the air with a musical hum. Arronax was caught off guard, momentarily helpless in the wake of his spell. For perhaps the first time ever he had failed to kill what he was aiming at, and it would be the end of him. My blade sliced through his midnight black robe effortlessly, elven blood spraying up into the air like a fountain. He gasped, mortally wounded, and fell to the ground while still clutching his chest. He flailed his arm desperately, mumbling what I suspected could only have been a healing spell. At the last moment, Sebastian's gun rang out and Arronax stopped moving entirely. *I can't deny that you deserved that, Arronax, but for what it's worth... I think you've turned over a new leaf. Rest in peace, it's been a long time coming.*

Franklin fired his own gun at me, but I moved too fast for him to anticipate. Combat had begun in earnest and my reflexes took over where my emotions left me helpless. I was behind him before he even realized he missed, but before my blade could pierce his chainmail I stopped. *I can't do this... these people are my friends... Franklin, you've made me laugh so many times, I just can't...* That momentary pause was all it took for Franklin to turn around and fire a shot at me, piercing my shoulder straight through. The pain hurt terribly, but the blessing of Velorien kept me strong. For all the mortal wounds I'd already suffered, I was still in excellent shape.

From the corner of my eye I saw Kerghan discarding his robe, emerging from it as a horrific, beastly amalgamation of parts both

living and dead. His figure was gaunt and skeletal, his rotted and yellow skin stretched tightly over the thick bones protruding from his ghastly form. His legs were twisted and mutilated into a single appendage without shape or form, giving his lower half the appearance of a half-decomposed snake. Even his bones were a mangled and mutilated, several bony spikes protruding at odd angles off of his shoulders, elbows, skull, and even the ridges of his spine. He was positively revolting, and yet... for some reason I had chosen to side with him. *I had to... I had no choice, if I didn't then Nathaniel would...*

Terry dove through the air, grabbing Franklin by the back of the neck and sinking his teeth in deeply. He gripped Franklin's shoulder with his front paws, twisting his neck powerfully and violently while chewing through Franklin's armor. I closed my eyes and wished I could silence the horrible noises as well. Franklin gasped in horror as Terry pierced his armor and his flesh, snapping his spine and quite literally tearing his head off at the neck. *Even if I'd wanted to, it's too late to change my mind now... I'm sorry, Franklin... this truly was your last adventure.*

Seeing everybody slowly falling all around him, Kraka-tur shrieked in horror, "No! You won't! You can't! I won't go so easily!" His fear obvious and direct, he swiped at me uselessly with one of his claws. Of every one of my companions, he was by far the easiest to bring down.

I twirled around him deftly, swinging my blade from the ground upwards when I'd reached his back. Kraka-tur was no different from the dozens of dragons I'd slayed before, only my hatred for him was far more solid. Kryggird's Falchion sliced through his scaly hide easily, piercing through to the vital organs beyond. The force of the strike sent him flying, and finally he collapsed to the ground with a solid thud. *I can't say I ever liked you, right from the time I read your journal. This one's for Bellerogrim.*

While my attention was distracted, Virgil turned and swung his axe at me... the very axe that I made him. I didn't even have the energy or desire to avoid his blow, I simply looked on as he attacked me, the axe cutting clear through my armor and chopping across my

midsection. It was almost as if I sat there hoping his strike would kill me, prevent me from doing what I knew had to come next. The pain from the wound, the feeling of the blood seeping out and dripping to the ground was nothing compared to the emotional torment I felt in that single moment. If it hadn't been for the blessing of Velorien I would have fallen dead right where I stood... the blessing that I never told anybody I even received.

"Virgil... why...? How could you...?" Tears clouded my vision. I refused to believe that Virgil, of all people, was trying his best to kill me.

From the sound of his voice, he wasn't having any easier of a time with it than I was having of killing the others. "You leave me with no choice, Samantha! I can't... I can't let you be the one to destroy the world! You're better than that! I'll tell the world that you died fighting Kerghan bravely... it's the least I can do..."

"Oh, Virgil... why...? I don't want to do this..." I could scarcely see through my tears, and my soul cried out in such fierce pain that I very nearly went numb. "I can't possibly tell you how sorry I am, Virgil. This is like some horrible nightmare that I can't wake up from, no matter how hard I try. Goodbye, Virgil." I didn't even watch, I simply let my reflexes take over. *Please forgive me, Virgil... I have no choice.* I felt my blade cutting through his flesh and I winced as though I were cutting my own arm from my body. When I heard his plate armor clattering to the floor, his body lifeless within it, I finally collapsed to my knees and I sobbed.

Terry barked and I could see Sebastian petting him lightly, quietly. Kerghan picked up his robe and shrunk back into it. I simply sat there and cried. I cried even harder than I had when I first learned how Frederick had died. *I'll join you soon, Virgil... I'll introduce you to Frederick, I promise...*

I looked up at Kerghan, tears still streaming down my face, and he beckoned to me. His voice was so confident, so satisfied. He'd known exactly what to do to get his way, and in the end I was nothing more than a puppet dancing on his strings.

"Splendid. That you are truly ready to walk by my side on this

journey. It is only for us to cross the bridge... are you ready?"

You left me with no choice... you left me with no bloody choice. No matter how much regret had assailed me in the last several moments, there was no turning back. Even if I decided to turn on Kerghan and somehow came out the victor, it would only spell an eternity of torment for Nathaniel. I had made my decision and I would stick by it all the way through to the end. Frederick... Virgil... I'll be home soon. "Yes... let us go and finish this together..."

Having joined with Kerghan in his quest to extinguish all life, I returned to Arcanum by his side and vanquished all that lived there. Kerghan then turned on me. In the ensuing battle I narrowly defeated him, but at great cost to myself. I am even now sitting upon the ruins of Arcanum, waiting for my end to come...

Chapter the Last: Triumph Over Nightmares

"Samantha? Is everything alright?"

I opened my eyes as Virgil placed his hand gently on my shoulder. "Well, I'm more than a little nervous. What if the worst happens?" *Gods, nothing could be that bad... only somebody as truly disturbed as I am would even dream up such a horrible scenario.*

His voice was calm and soothing; I was glad for his presence. "It won't. Have a little faith in yourself, and in those you've chosen to bring with you."

Have faith in myself, eh? I suppose that's good advice. "There's no time like the present, I suppose." I stepped the rest of the way into the portal in front of me, praying that what actually happened would be nothing like the waking nightmare I had just suffered.

Standing on the other side, I came face to face with that robed figure I'd grown to despise ever since our encounter on the plains of Morbihan. He might have called himself a different name back then, but he was still every bit as evil, "Kerghan..."

He stared up at me hatefully, his eyes burning deeply into my soul, "Yes, it is I, Kerghan... I've known you were coming, traveler, seen the ripples in left in the wake of destiny's champion. At last you've come to me... young, naive, like a small child just taking its first, confused steps in the world. Have you come to stop me, child? Do you even know what it is you've come to stop?"

My nightmare had made me cautious. The anger deep inside of me faded, and I was no longer quite so eager to lash out at Kerghan or provoke him. I analyzed everything he said carefully, searching for

hidden meanings he'd never intended to deliver. *Such arrogance, such confidence... do you really know as much about me as you pretend to? If you did, you would've stopped me long ago... so why? What purpose do your lies serve? You don't need to resort to tricks to make me wary when I'm dealing with Kerghan the Terrible.* I chose my words carefully, "I don't know what's going on here, but I know I don't like it..."

He seemed to consider my careful words interestedly, "Very well." I looked at him, still afraid, but outwardly showing no emotion. Kerghan looked unaware of the tumultuous feelings roiling beneath my calm exterior, and for that I was desperately glad. His words reached out to me, beckoning me, begging me to understand when nobody else would, "Hear my story and decide for yourself. I know that your road has been long, as has my own. Perhaps we might yet see eye to eye..." *I wouldn't bloody count on it.*

I had no sympathy for Kerghan, no real interest in hearing whatever it was he wanted to say, but in my caution I let him continue on regardless. His desire to explain everything was a weakness, and in so explaining he would make himself vulnerable to me. "I'm listening." *If you want to trust me with your plans and weaknesses, then you go right ahead... I'm no stranger to abusing the trust of others.*

"In Arcanum, I was a mage of great power, the only human to ever sit on the great Elven Council. For years I studied the magicks of Necromancy... the arts of physical and spiritual healing, the resurrection of the souls of the dead..."

200 years? Are you joking? You must've been ready to keel over any day! Even in the Age of Legends it seemed absurd for a human to live a full 200 years. He truly must have been a potent mage, and he would've had to be for the Elven Council to take notice of him. "And so? What happened?" I let Kerghan continue on while considering the gravity of his words.

He was eager to continue talking, to try and sway his greatest foe from the path of righteousness. "Perhaps it is just the way of humans, but what I had seen and learned was not enough. I craved knowledge, felt the shadow of my own mortality. And so I looked deeper, and the secrets of Black Necromancy were shown to me, and I reveled in the truths I had uncovered, and I shared them with the Council..."

Indeed, just as Loghaire said... humans are constantly motivated by the fear of their own death... never considering the consequences of their actions. Kerghan's lack of morality was hardly news to me, though that it stemmed from his own fear was an interesting little tidbit. On some level he had to know that he was wrong. "They saw it differently than you did, though..." *Keep right on talking...*

A dark look shone in his eyes, and his voice took on the distinct tone of revulsion as he continued speaking. "The Council... that sad, puppet Council. They didn't know what to think, and how could they? These were new discoveries, there were no precedents... and they listened to Arronax over the voice of their own reason..." *Are you quite mad? They knew exactly what to think, and they were revolted.*

Even though Arronax was standing right next to me, Kerghan was so lost in his own thoughts that he scarcely even noticed anymore.

"What do you mean? What does Arronax have to do with this?" *Well, I'm certainly not going to point it out. Be as self-absorbed as you want to be.*

"Arronax! From the very beginning, he hated me. Son of Nasrudin, proud elven heir to the leadership of the council... he saw my presence on the council as a travesty, a dishonor to the ways of magick. He waited for an opportunity to defame me, and when it came, he viciously attacked..."

Although Kerghan's words were angry, his manner of speaking, for some reason, was not. I could tell he had a special hatred for Arronax, and why wouldn't he? There was something aside from that, though, and I intended on finding out what. "Why? What happened?"

He held his arms in front of himself, staring with satisfaction at his outstretched hands. An obvious pride crept into his voice. "My studies were of the souls of the dead. Once I had seen the darker side of Necromancy, I began to speak with those souls, to animate the soulless, to quench the lives of the living..."

Somehow, I had to get through his obvious delusions, "But can't you see how some might see those actions as evil?" *You know what you did was wrong... I can tell that you know... so why must you continue to pretend like it was all for the purity of research?*

Anger was his only response, sudden rage at my accusation, "The bodies I experimented upon were already dead! If I raised their souls to again quench them, who is to say I didn't have the right? I'm no monster... I know that the line between good and evil is a gray one, and perhaps all of my actions weren't necessarily pure, but I never killed a living soul..."

His anger was only proof that I was right, his sudden need to defend himself so vociferously could only stem from an inner guilt that ate away at his very soul. It was as though there were two thoughts in his mind, each fighting for domination. One was Kerghan the Terrible, the necromancer that stood in front of me, the ancient evil bent on destroying the world. The other was a timid, cowardly human who was once so afraid of death that he obsessively researched it by any means necessary, even knowing it was truly wrong. "You have a point, but there may be holes in your logic..." I tried to sound sympathetic while at the same time urging him to consider the ill effects of his twisted mind.

"And who are you, or they, to judge me? And banishment? Banishment for some questionable experiments? The Council was prepared to exile me, to throw me out of their number... but no! The jealousy of Arronax turned them against me, forced their hand. His words became the evidence against me, and they sentenced me to the Void."

"And eventually Arronax was sent here as well..." *You know, looking back on it, nobody regrets banishing you... but I suppose that doesn't even enter into your twisted little mind.*

Kerghan smiled grimly, though I could scarcely see it beneath his robes. It was slow and subtle, shrouded in darkness. "Yes... for the same crime on a grander scale. And when we met here in the Void, I had become so much more powerful than he, and again he feared my words, and he made war against me. And now he is in chains, and this Void has truly become his prison. Not so for me..."

I still did not care to remind him that Arronax had been released from his prison, by my hand no less. If he was so absorbed with himself to have forgotten such a crucial detail, I wouldn't be the one to rouse him from his self-inflicted blindness. "What do you mean?"

Do keep talking, pretending it's just you and I, all alone on this platform...

He laughed, a raspy and horrible noise like the sound of a lifetime factory worker coughing up black soot in the streets. "In your world, your Arcanum, I was powerful, perhaps the most powerful human magicker who has ever been." *That may very well be true, but you're still positively insane.* "But to humans... cursed with our shortness of life, our brevity... what is this power? What can be learned in that impermanent spark that is our lives? Nothing. But here, in this so-called prison, there are no limits, there is no end..."

This place... this VOID... has no time as you know it... I've been here for more than 2,000 of your years, and yet I've aged not at all... I feel as I did the moment they sent me here, or as when the Dark Elves first called to me. Do you now see? Here I can do everything I did in your world, but I am unfettered by the chains of mortality that time hangs upon us..."

Yet by the time you finally realized your own immortality, it was too late... you'd gone too far down this path of madness. Once the original motivation that fueled your research had dwindled, there was nowhere else to go but down... Regardless of how well I might have understood his reasons, it didn't change the fact that they were completely bloody insane. "Fine. Then stay here, and leave our world be..." I didn't expect it to work - nothing was ever that easy - but I certainly had to try.

"I truly wish I could. My reasons for returning aren't what you'd think...! I have no aspirations for power or domination like your companion Arronax did... aspirations that I became the victim of. No, those are the motivations of the living, and I no longer place myself among them..."

It seemed like he was finally coming back to the present, realizing that we were not alone and that the two of us were still enemies. *Blast! It's still too soon!* I had a good insight into how his mind first began to twist and tear, but it did little to help me combat him in the present. I needed more, something I could hopefully use against him to place the seed of doubt that I would then nurture to fruition. "Then what? What is it you want?" *Come on, like any crazed villain I bet you're just dying to tell me all about it.* He did exactly that.

If only I could show you the places I've seen, you might understand the things I say. I've been to the desolate lands, wandered by those souls who still see the lands of the living, but wear the cloak of the dead. Blind to their own ends, they cry, passing through one another like shadows in the dying light of day.

I've traveled to where souls rot in torment, pierced with the jagged shards of life and vision, clinging to memory, regrets of the flesh. I saw that this prison was of their own making and the key was in unknowing, in release... and still, I traveled on.

And finally, I came to the place where souls go to die, where the mirrored and worn spirits fall into an endless sea of gray, mirrored glass... and I lowered myself within, and laid there among them and I almost did not return.

And do you know what I found there? There, among the silent and battered shells of the innumerable? Peace, enlightenment, truth. Only then did I realize that this place, this life, is an abomination... a horrible distortion of the natural order.

This... LIFE... who mothered pain, and fear, and envy... these twisted children who exist only because we are here to feed them, to nourish them. This... LIFE... this afterthought... a disturbance, a mere ripple in that great, dead sea... not even the cause, but merely an effect sending these souls upward, screaming for release from the day they are torn from their waters. The effect of what? I do not know, nor do I care.

Have you ever spoken with the dead? Called to them from this side? Pull them from their silent rest? Do you know what it is that they feel? Pain. Pain when torn into this wakefulness, this reminder of the chaos from which they had escaped. Pain... at having to live. There will be no more pain. There will be... no more chaos.

"I can no longer tolerate the atrocities that this thing, this LIFE, has brought about. There will be peace. There will be quiet. Life will no longer be. And so I go to Arcanum to bring an end to it, and then I will join the souls of the dead when it is done."

"An interesting point of view. I can see the merit it holds..." *How could I not? If everything were put to rest, living and undead, Nathaniel*

and I could both rejoin Frederick in the afterlife... knowing what I know, vividly remembering the details of that place... it stirs a longing in me like nothing else ever will. ...but my needs do not supercede the needs of the world, my life is not everybody's life. I need not rush into my own death, it will come for me eventually, and then Frederick and I can be together for all of eternity. Neither must I bring an end to the entire world just for the release of my son. I will find him myself, and release him with my own two hands... it is the least I can do for him, after having failed him when he was still alive. My resolve strengthened in the face of Kerghan's madness, and I knew deep in my heart that I had come to the correct conclusion.

Kerghan nodded at me, pleased, folding his hands in front of himself. He was completely oblivious of my resolve to destroy him, hearing only the deceptive words I presented to him, "And why not? I realize that you've followed the way of the righteous, or at least that's the role you've decided to play. But you've yet to see the other side. Follow me, and I'll show you things you've never imagined..."

Hmph. Fat chance. "Your offer is tempting... perhaps..." I continued leading him on, luring him into my verbal trap. He knew, somewhere in that twisted mind of his, that he was positively a lunatic. I aimed to find that remaining shred of sanity and drag it out into the light of day, kicking and screaming if I had to. Weapons were for the time when words failed, and even against an opponent like Kerghan there was always the possibility of negotiation.

Unfortunately, Arronax wasn't nearly as familiar with me as the rest of my companions. He couldn't detect my deception and, much like Kerghan, he mistook it for sincerity. "Are you daft, woman? Are you not listening to what this madman is proposing? He will kill every living being in both realms, including you."

Don't you dare ruin this. I quickly turned aside and whispered into his ear quietly, "I think I can convince him he's wrong."

"I think you have taken leave of your senses. I will allow you this attempt at a peaceful resolution, even though I doubt it has much hope of success."

"We'll see about that." I whispered to him, immediately turning back to Kerghan so as to avoid excessive suspicion. That I whispered to

Arronax at all was already a strike against me, but I had to have faith in my own skills. *Just as Virgil said... have faith in myself...* "Now, Kerghan, I have a few words to say about this..."

He actually looked at me with an amused expression on his face. "Splendid. I've spent the last 2,000 years developing my philosophy, but I'm always eager to hear another's thoughts. Please, proceed..." *I'll have you know I can be quite persuasive... actually, it'll be better for me if you don't know.*

"Very well." I cleared my throat, preparing for what was sure to be a difficult conversation. "Let's speak of the nature of life and death..."

He nodded, happy to challenge whatever opinions I held. "Yes... let us speak of this." He was so damned sure of himself, and I hoped to use that arrogance to my advantage now that the negotiations had begun in earnest. "It is my opinion that the nature of life is accidental, that this reality we experience is merely a distortion of death. What say you, traveler?"

That may very well be the reality YOU experience, but... I suddenly had an idea, and decided to run with it, "As you've said, I have only my experience to draw from..."

"Yes... but what has that experience taught you? I know not the roads you've traveled, but I do know that all living things feel pain and loss... it's my opinion that they feel these things because they were NEVER meant for what we know as life... their souls are not equipped for it."

"Hold, Kerghan." *Do shut up. I'm trying to make a point here.* "That assumption is based on YOUR experience..." *It's easy to blame others for their 'flawed' perceptions when you never consider that your own is flawed in the same ways, isn't it?* I stared at him with a passionate fire in my eyes, eager to continue our duel of words.

He stood there for a moment, pensive, silent, considering heavily the words I spoke and how he could incorporate them into his own philosophies. "Yes, you're correct. I concede you that point. But! I have seen both sides, whereas you have only the lands of the living." *That's where you are so very, very wrong..* "Trust me when I say that the souls who are called back to this life are in the most excruciating

pain... it's unnatural..."

Virgil and I might have some pain in our continued living, but we have joy as well... we have each other... we have a purpose to our continued life. When my death comes, I certainly welcome it... but I will not seek it out so readily. "Maybe your opinions bias your observations?" It was my opinion that I still had a reason to live, and so my pain was slight. For Kerghan it was surely different. He'd already lived well beyond what a normal human should have... he tired of it.

Unfortunately, my argument didn't particularly seem to convince him, "Are you saying that I can't trust the sight of my own eyes? You presume too much, traveler... you've NO idea of the things I've endured... of the things endured by ALL the souls of the dead because of the thoughtlessness of the living..."

I had a difficult time explaining to him how his pain was his alone, not shared by all. The pain that I felt, though clear, was certainly not as excruciating as Kerghan made it out to be. Some souls felt that way, certainly, like the spirit of Charles Brehgo I had encountered so very long ago... but there were exceptions. "Yes, but perhaps that is the nature of those particular souls..."

"What do you mean? Are you faulting the souls of the dead for the meddling of the living?"

Hmph. Meddling? You're the one that started all the so-called 'meddling' with the spirits of the dead in the first place, you hypocritical bastard... but I'm not here to defend necromancy. "No. Some souls are in pain because they hold on too tightly..." Even as I spoke the words I knew them to be true. When I thought of Frederick, focused on my longing to be with him, it truly did hurt... almost unbearably so. But when I thought of what I still had yet to do in life, when I thought of finding the bastard holding Nathaniel in a mortal shell and giving him a solid dose of motherly justice... living didn't seem quite so bad anymore.

Kerghan started to grow irritated and I knew I was getting close to breaking through that thick skull of his. "But you speak as if these souls have a choice when they're brought back! It's the mindless bravado of the living that subjects them to the vagaries of this life...!"

I pressed on, growing more and more confident even as Kerghan

grew more irritated. My fear washed away and I stood my ground solidly. "No, but the PAIN is of their own making..." *2,000 years of philosophy, eh? That doesn't matter one bit when you're a bloody lunatic. Now be a good little terror and listen to reason.*

He seemed like he had a response prepared for me, one that possibly would've involved violence, but then he suddenly fell silent, nearly defeated. "I'm willing to say you might be correct. But what proof have you?"

The proof is standing right in front of you... "I've spoken with souls who weren't in pain... and you're wrong about me... I HAVE seen the lands of the dead. I've come back from them, not in pain like you, but with a purpose... with a reason to continue living."

"Just because some souls have accepted the nature of this distortion doesn't justify its existence. If what you're saying is correct, then what is the nature of death? Of life? Which is the natural state? Why is there pain on one side, and uncertainty on the other?"

It almost bothered me that Kerghan even had to ask... he was desperate, grasping at the remaining strands of the extreme conclusions he'd drawn in his own insanity. "The distortion is caused by the eyes with which we choose to see. I choose to focus on my reason for continuing to live, the joy that life may yet bring me. You have focused only on your own pain, and that pain perpetuates itself."

He finally looked away from me, no longer able to look me in the eyes. His voice came slowly, shamefully, "Perhaps it is my own arrogance, my own bravado, that has brought us here, to this crossroads. The question is... where to go from here? We've spoken of fate, of prophecy. Have I traveled this road too long to turn back? Perhaps I have no choice but to continue on to the end..."

The pleading in his words came across clearly to me, the long-held desire for a solution, swift and permanent. "No... I have a solution. I can free you once and for all..." *You know those are the words you've been longing to hear... embrace them, accept them... go quietly to your own oblivion...*

Sadness was the only expression I could see in his eyes any longer, a

deep and all-encompassing melancholy. "Truly, I wish there were freedom for me. But I cannot let go of this life, knowing that I might be called back to its pain. No, it seems I've no choice..."

As if on cue, Sebastian pulled V'ed Eckes' robe off of the large, green orb he carried with him. Kerghan looked at it, perplexed, and I spoke, "The Vendigroth Device... it will sever you from this world forever... just as you said, no more pain... no more chaos. It's the solution you've always wanted, and I offer it to you now."

Something like hope flares in him.

"Really? You can sever the bonds which hold my soul to the lands of the living? This object can actually do that?"

Right... he was banished before its creation, he has no idea its purpose.

"Yes. I can free you from the pain that you fear. This object was built to destroy Arronax, to sever him from the world forever. It can do this to you as well.

He bowed his head towards me, graciously, his shoulders sagging. "So many years I've raged against the living. All those years, and the distortion was in my own soul. No man can see the nature of his flaws with diseased eyes... the contradiction lies within me."

At last, I had truly convinced him of his own insanity, the error of his ways. With the solution in my hands, he was overjoyed to simply give in, to let go of everything. "Let me end your journey, Kerghan. Go to your rest." I almost couldn't believe what I was saying, yet even more strange was how much sense it made... and how Kerghan responded. It wasn't every day that one could convince another to accept their own death.

If it had been possible for him to shed tears, I suspected he would have at that moment. His voice was no longer one of sadness, but one of joy and also regret. "Yes. I thank you... and I'm sorry. So very, very sorry. Perhaps some souls are born into death... they never knew how to live..."

I smiled at him as Sebastian set the Vendigroth Device on the ground in front of me. "Yes, I think you might be right..."

"Goodbye, traveler. My road ends here... I wish you luck on your travels..."

"Good bye, Kerghan..." I pressed the button on the top of the device, stepping away from it cautiously. Kerghan walked closer to it with open arms, welcoming his own death like it was a warm ray of sunshine. He tossed off his robe, revealing the hideous, snake-like creature beneath. I turned away from the sight uncomfortably, not wanting to think about how painful such a form must have been, how trafficking in the lands of the dead might have bestowed such a ghastly form.

The riveted casing of the Vendigroth device split apart, giving way to a spinning, spiked contraption on the inside. I felt a horrible wave of power as a thick, green light projected upwards from the center, enveloping Kerghan completely. He started to grow pale and translucent, beginning to shimmer out of existence.

The innumerable spikes that graced the interior of the device shot forth like a network of a thousand thin, metal wires. Kerghan tossed his arms upwards, welcoming the oblivion that now sought him. He slowly shrank down into the device, growing ever smaller while the wires continued to expand, twisting, tangling into each other.

Kerghan's now fading body burst into an explosion of a thousand souls, their translucent blue, skeletal figures flying outward from the device even as a separate, bright blue and white light shot forth from the base of it. I could hear no sound save for the terrible wailing of the damned, and beneath it the ever-present hum of machinery.

The strange wires that twisted and tangled all over at last splayed upwards, guiding the souls of the damned away from the machine while the spectacular nova of light held Kerghan's body and spirit still in its menacing confines. The wailing ceased as the souls drifted upwards, the network of wires pulled downwards, back into the device, dragging Kerghan along as well. Once the spirits were out of sight everything seemed to flow in reverse, pulling metal, light, flesh, and soul all inwards towards the center of the device.

The horrible hum and shrill clanking reached a final crescendo, almost deafening in its pitch. Then, as suddenly as it had all started, everything was silent. The riveted sides of the orb clanked mechanically back into place, and the whole thing wobbled just

slightly before settling back on the ground. I stared at it for several moments, and then, slowly at first, I heard the applause from behind me.

Arronax was the first to speak, "I cannot believe that you actually managed to convince him of his own lunacy! Well done, madam! Well done, indeed!"

Vollinger nudged me on the hip with a pleased look on his face, "Your gift for oratory is unparalleled, and you certainly put it to good use. I am pleased to call you friend."

Franklin couldn't help but laugh, "You know, for a moment there I really thought we were going to fight Kerghan the Terrible! I must say I'm almost disappointed, but one can't very well tell stories from the Void when he's DEAD, now can he? I was frightened out of my wits! Good show!"

Sebastian, too, grinned at me. "Hey, I like this outcome as much as any, though I would've loved to squeeze a shot off at that bastard. Ah well, no harm done."

Virgil was silent at first, simply staring at me. I looked back at him and he stepped forward, slowly, unsure of what he was about to do. I grinned wickedly and dove at him, wrapping my arms around him tightly. "We did it, Virgil! We defeated Kerghan!"

He only laughed, hugging me back, "I didn't do a thing... you did, Samantha. You... saved us all... just like I always knew you would, from the moment I saw you."

"Oh stop it!" I scolded him good-naturedly. "Hey, wait a minute... where's Terry?" I looked around just in time to see Terry nosing the Vendigroth Device off the platform and into the great, black beyond. *You know... that's probably for the best.* He woofed at me happily and Sebastian tossed him a piece of jerky, laughing. Noting another peculiar absence, I looked around for Kraka-tur as well, but he was nowhere to be found. *Probably off to cower in his desolate valley for the rest of eternity, then... that, too, is probably for the best.*

It took the dwarves no more than a week to finish assembling the portal device, especially with the help of myself and all the other technological enthusiasts I brought with me. Working with them was a pleasure, even if I didn't understand a fraction of what they were saying half the time.

Although we were all still trapped within the Void, that single week was a joyous one. We were victorious, Kerghan defeated, and every minute we worked brought us one step closer to home.

When at last the machine was completed, I was chosen to be the first one to step through it... as an honor for everything that I had done. Make no mistake about it, I was not a test subject... if there's one thing a dwarf knows better than anything else at all it's a machine he built with his own two hands. That the dwarves who built it saw fit to send me through even before they could witness the marvel of their own device was an honor indeed, and I recognized it for what it was.

The central wheel on the machine began revolving around the larger frame, slowly at first but rapidly gaining in speed. A blue light suddenly pierced the center of the wheel, following it along the track as it revolved around and around. The light only gained in intensity and formed a thin, white halo where the center of the wheel pathed repeatedly, faster and faster. The halo began to expand and shimmer, forming a thin, blue film across its center and radiating a crackling, white light at its edge.

That thin film grew wider and thicker, forming into the portal that I would take to the other side. Grenjar Silver Hammer nodded at me with a smile and I slowly climbed the short staircase leading to the shimmering portal. I closed my eyes and, without hesitation, I stepped through.

Epilogue: The World That Survived Kerghan

Because I delivered the secret ingredient to Jongle Dunne, he perfected his alchemical process and eventually found a way to make gold from common lead. Needless to say, he became the richest man in all of Arcanum. I tried visiting that stingy bastard once, asking for my cut of the profits, but he insisted that 70 gold had been fair payment for services rendered. I lost my temper and was escorted out by his half ogre guards.

Ristezze, that foppish bastard, had much better luck than I did. He claimed that his old friend Jongle owed him many favors, but I don't buy it for a second. Whatever the truth may be, he used the money he was given to buy out the old, abandoned Emporium of Wonders, previously owned by the late H.T. Parnell, and he opened it back up for business. His prized Boot of Bessie Toone has been featured there ever since.

The defeat of Lukan and his henchmen, coupled with my freeing of the ghost of Bessie Toone, enabled Shrouded Hills to grow and become a thriving community once again. A new silver vein was discovered in the old Bessie Toone mine. Workers poured into town by the dozens and, within a few years, Shrouded Hills was a bustling boom town. Such towns often have problems keeping the peace. Shrouded Hills has no such trouble, mainly due to the efforts of their new sheriff, Doc Roberts.

The sister city to Shrouded Hills, Stillwater, did not change much with time, and its residents were quite happy for that fact. I heard a rumor once that a strange, oversized beast showed up in town one day, reeking of sulfur and sweat. Those few who saw it could only

glean from its strangled grunts and hoarse whispers that it was apparently looking for a ruby of some kind. Unable to find it, the twisted beast left the town and was never seen nor heard from again.

Donn Throgg, because of the advice that I gave him, became a leading political activist in the fight for orcish rights. In time, he legalized orcish labor unions, secured the vote for all citizens regardless of race or gender, and became the champion of equal rights and justice in Tarant. Before long, he was begrudgingly voted into the Industrial Council and, in a few years, he sat at its head. I never did get the chance to straighten out each and every gnome on the Council, but putting a half orc solidly at the top of it was surely the next best thing.

As a well known master of negotiation, I visited Mr. Throgg frequently. During one such visit to Tarant, I made a brief stop at the library, and I was quite surprised to find my old half ogre friend, Ogdin, reading a book inside. He wouldn't tell me how he escaped from the Isle of Despair, but he assured me that he owed me thanks. After that, I visited him every time I found myself back in Tarant, and he was always happily reading away in the corner. In time, the owner hired him to organize and catalogue every last book in the library. Whenever I visited thereafter, he was busily working away.

Following the deaths of Pollock and Darian Maug, the Boil was demolished and then built anew. The Bentley was renovated and became the most elegant hotel in Tarant. The owner, the honorable Mister Caleb Malloy, is often seen mixing drinks for his guests in the hotel bar. I still stop in to see him on occasion, especially since, for me, the whiskey is on the house.

Thanks in part to my recommendation, Sebastian found work at the Bentley as a bouncer. He felt the work was too easy, but leapt at the chance to live out a relatively quiet life with free food, lodging, and all the liquor he could stand to drink. The Bentley enforces a strict no-pets rule, but for Terry they make an exception.

Maximillian was returned to Dernholm and all of Cumbria rejoiced at the return of their rightful king. Under the new rule of Maximillian, Cumbria quickly grew into a powerful nation, embracing both magick

and technology. And, once again, the proud banner of the Dragon Knights flew from the ramparts of Dernholm Castle, set there by their new captain, Lianna Pel-Dar.

Along with Cumbria's new acceptance of technology came a whirlwind of knowledge and tolerance. Now able to study in the comfort of her own home, Jayna quickly became the most skilled herbologist in the kingdom. Her medicines have saved countless lives both at home and in the small skirmishes Cumbria occasionally finds itself in.

Because of my outstanding efforts in negotiating the terms for Caladon's membership into the Unified Kingdom, as well as the wise governing policies of Donn Throgg, Caladon and Tarant became equally prosperous. There was peace for many years in Arcanum.

Much like Ashbury before it, I eventually caught a rumor that Caladon was having difficulties with the dead rising up in its graveyard. I wasted no time in tracking down the bastard responsible, and it was none other than Geoffrey Tarellond-Ashe, abusing the powers of the Gem of Malachi Rench that I'd retrieved for him. I put the fear of death into him something proper, and he promised to never, ever set foot in the Caladon graveyard again. To placate my wrath, he even used the gem to give me a clue on Nathaniel's whereabouts. If it had been anybody else, I probably would've smashed the gem outright, but Geoffrey was too damned afraid of me to go back on his word. I've not heard of a single problem in Caladon's graveyard ever since.

Because I convinced the mayor of Black Root to rejoin Cumbria, there was a small struggle between Maximillian and the Industrial Council concerning ownership of the town. Maximillian was determined to defend his own, and he was successful in doing so. Under the protection of their new king, Black Root grew into one of the most important port cities in all of Arcanum.

Captain Edward Teach, grateful for my donation of a sturdy and seaworthy vessel, set off to explore the distant seas at the behest of the renowned adventurer, Franklin Payne. Their adventures, along with our own, were eventually published in a book written by

Franklin Payne himself. When not waist-deep in the most horrible trouble they can find, the two of them can occasionally be found at the Sour Barnacle, sharing stories over frothy mugs of ale.

Under the continued leadership of Loghaire Thunder Stone, the Wheel Clan came out of seclusion and rejoined the world. Songs have been composed about Loghaire's bravery and courage, and are still sung today among all of dwarvenkind.

At my insistence, Magnus Shale Fist sought out Erick Obsidian of the Wheel Clan to inquire about dwarven history, in hopes of finding some information regarding his lost clan. Last I heard, he was happily assisting Erick in his study of the Durin Stone and the Iron Clan caverns.

Kan Kerai and the Bedokaan made a lasting peace with the elves of Qintarra, and together they rid the Glimmering Forest and the Dark Fens of poachers and of the spoilers of the land. In time, the Bedokaan became a more civilized people, sharing in the wonders of the new age. Still lingering in Qintarra, unsure of where to go next, Jormund, the dwarf mage, found in the Bedokaan a like-minded people. He trained and researched with them, eventually making significant strides in the college of Nature magick. His name will be remembered for many years to come.

The dark elves were never seen nor heard from again. To this day I still don't know if it was the ogres or the Hand that got them in the end, but the thought of Vollinger shooting down M'in Gorad by Gideon's side brings a smile to my face. If it was truly him, I know he did it out of duty, but likely took some measure of personal satisfaction in it as well.

Upon returning to Arcanum, Arronax buried his father on the Isle of Thanatos. Later, he traveled to the Vendigroth Wastes, and there used his powers and single-handedly raised the city from the ruins it had become. Vendigroth again became a place of awe, and wonder.

I have since visited there and conferred with their scientists to create a modification on the Vendigroth device. As one of a very small number of people who witnessed the original device's operation, I

was uniquely qualified to assist them in developing a separate device that would sever the souls of the undead from their mortal shells, sending them to the great, peaceful beyond.

Using the money I earned on my journey, along with the countless artifacts I uncovered, I founded a museum of history in Caladon. The Frederick Colburn Memorial Museum still stands today as a monument to my undying love for my late husband. I will return to him one day, of that I am sure, but if I've learned anything from my encounter with Kerghan it's that I shouldn't be so hasty to leap to my own death.

Meanwhile, I still roam in search of Nathaniel's spirit, carrying with me the device that will send him back to Frederick's side. Virgil happily continues to accompany me wherever my journey should take me, never once complaining. Although we don't talk much about the future, I suspect our adventures are far from over. There's a bit of Franklin Payne in the both of us, it seems, and we're both content to share in each other's company while traveling Arcanum for the rest of our days.

-Samantha Colburn, April 2nd, 1897